

JULY, 1954

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**IMAGINATION**  
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

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**TERROR  
OUT OF  
SPACE**

by Dwight V. Swain

**IMAGINATION**

STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

VOL. 5 NO. 7  
ISSUE



# Introducing the

# AUTHOR



*Winston Marks*



I would rather write than work. (See cut of busy writer generating an idea—the book is the latest Kinsey thing.) Which is solely why I write.

This may be heresy, but I suspect it is almost axiomatic among most fiction writers: Writing is not work.

Writing is a sort of documented dreaming—speaking of fiction, of course—and dreaming is what you do when you sleep, and sleeping is what writers do best of all.

Unfortunately, most of what is written must be revised. Revision is work. I know only one author who likes revision. But he doesn't like to write.

He's famous and I'm not.

He's rich, and I'm, well, 38, married, father of three daughters and

considered as unemployed in the neighbors' eyes. I was not born a writer, unless you would say also that I was born a grocery clerk, bellhop, sales-manager, aircraft pilot, soldier, sailor, trade-paper editor, huckster, advertising man, columnist, linoleum layer, electronic technician, political campaign manager, chemical-sacker, typist, sugar-loader, timekeeper, amateur semanticist and public speaker, fencing enthusiast, Lion, Elk and Episcopal—for I am or have been all these things. What I intended to be, as you might guess from the story in this issue, was a doctor. My studies were interrupted by lack of money, brains or devotion to study—I forget which, but it was some such trivial thing.

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# The Editorial

LETTERS in recent issues of Madge have been carrying on a friendly debate as to who should control a space station after completion—the USA or the United Nations. The views favoring American control (based on the assumption that we will develop it first) hold that UN control would be in essence handing a strategic weapon over to Russia. This debate has been fictional in nature since the discussion concerns a technological achievement yet to come. One might be inclined to adopt the attitude, "Let the future take care of itself." In the meantime we can kick the idea around casually. Recent word from Russia, however, impresses us with the fact that perhaps our casual study and discussion of space travel should become an item of immediate concern and official attention.

UNITED Press, via its London office, recently revealed that Moscow Radio has announced that Soviet scientists have been ordered to get the jump in developing space travel on American interplanetary scientists, who, according to Moscow, are now toying with interplanetary travel on their drafting boards. The Soviets said new committees have been formed to study and develop astro-physical sciences.

UNITED Press quoted Moscow Radio as follows: "For 1954

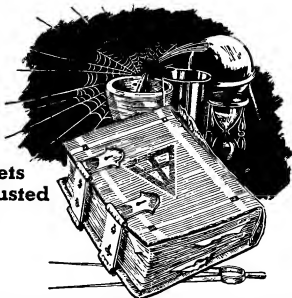
the committees will popularize the problems of interplanetary flight and the present state of interplanetary travel and research into this problem."

IS this another Soviet propaganda campaign aimed at keeping us in a state of uncertainty? Perhaps, but the bald truth as we see it is that we cannot afford to laugh the announcement away as simply a Communist political exploitation of science fiction. The Moon offers great tactical position and prestige to whichever nation succeeds in reaching it first—not to mention the incredible new frontiers such an initial space voyage will open up for all mankind. The "future" is today—and it's time we acted positively. Lest we be left in the lurch . . . . . wh



"Darn hot rodders!"

**Secrets  
entrusted  
to a  
few**



## *The Unpublished Facts of Life*

THERE are some things that cannot be generally told—*things you ought to know*. Great truths are dangerous to some—but factors for *personal power and accomplishment* in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws—their amazing discoveries of the *hidden processes of man's mind, and the mastery of life's problems*. Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today.

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**The Rosicrucians** (AMORC)

SAN JOSE, CALIFORNIA, U. S. A.



Somewhere in the void was a planet with a new element that could transform men into supermen. It was Boone's job to find that world—if he survived—

# The Terror Out Of Space

*By*

*Dwight V. Swain*

**I**T WAS a good proposition, the way the lean, grey man from Associated Independents told it. He ticked off the points on his fingers:

"Ten thousand credits an Earth year, Boone, win or lose. Full command of the field force. Five per cent cut on the profits if you get a mekronal processing unit in



production on one of the unassigned satellites ahead of the Cartel."

"Sorry, Terral." Again, Boone glanced at his chronox. "It's like I said. Any other time I might be interested. But right now I've got something else on my mind."

"Fifteen thousand, then. And ten per cent if you spot in more than one satellite." Terral leaned forward. "Hell, man, that's more than you can hope to make as a GX if you stay with the Cartel!"

Boone grinned, after a fashion. "Sorry."

The lean man pushed back abruptly and gulped down his drink. "Then it *is* the woman!" he accused. A spark of pale fire lighted behind the grey eyes. Even in the dimness of the thil-shop, Boone couldn't miss the tension. "Krobis shoves her in ahead of you, but you'd still throw away your future—"

Boone brought his own glass down on the tanach table top, just hard enough so that it clicked a curt, sharp period to the other's sentence. "And what makes that your business?"

For the moment Terral's narrow jaws seemed to widen at the hinges. His lips peeled back, as if he were about to say something raw and cutting. Then, reconsidering, he breathed in deep instead and slumped loose in his seat. The thin

lips drew together in a crooked smile. "My business—? Nothing, Boone. Nothing at all."

"That's the way I see it, too." Boone got up. "Good night, Terral."

He strode on out, not bothering to shake hands or look back.

The night closed in upon him—the night, and the narrow street; the alien sounds and smells and stir of Gandor City. A cadet from the Federation fleet pushed past him, a moss-furred Callistan crustach perched on his shoulder. Behind the cadet came two spasm-masked berlon prospectors, up from the Hertzog fields, leading their lumbering flipper-tentacled coddob by a chain run through its gill-slits. The throb of the atmosphere compressors pressed in like a giant heartbeat, punctuated by the rattle of surface carriers, the shrill wail of tricol pipes. A sweetish, slightly nauseous scent of theswood flares and Martian paggod eddied from the doorway of a greasy-looking grill that placarded "Genuine Earth Meats — No Synthetics, No Alien Substitutes!"

Once more, Boone checked his chronox.

It was less than an hour till the end of the cycle now.

In spite of himself, Boone's belly tightened. Turning at the first intersection, he headed for the car-



rier station.

The IC flight was already on the line and waiting. He found a seat next to a dour-faced tech whose eye-whites showed green with mekronal infusion.

THE carrier wheeled slowly forward into the lock that sealed off Gandor City's precious, bubble-pressured air supply from the bleak world outside. A moment later the lock's outer hatch opened. Climbing on its antigravitational beam—slowly, at first; then faster and faster—the carrier lanced out across the star-spangled black velvet of the Ganymedan sky.

The minutes dragged. Crags and peaks came and went below; then the dull grey wash of a cliff-bound sea of liquid gas. Off to the left, the sky took on a scarlet-purple tint, reflection of Jupiter's great Red Spot.

Down again, then. Down through another hatch, into another lock.

Its inner seal opened. The carrier swept into the bubble proper, settling onto the clean-swept ramp with its glaring forspark lights and the sign that said:

INTERPLANETARY CARTELS  
UNLIMITED  
MEKRONAL PROCESSING  
DIVISION  
GANYMEDAN ADVANCE BASE

Boone passed through the scanner unit; bared his ID plate for the guard.

"Back early, aren't you, Mister Boone?" The guard grinned. "Guess it makes a difference when you go alone. Though I will say that new job's a nice break for Miss Rey."

Boone nodded, not speaking.

"She goes out tonight, doesn't she?" The guard's face grew sober. "Hope she makes it o.k. That Titan run is no picnic—not with this monster business hitting half the ships. Bucking that kind of thing ain't my idea of a woman's job, no matter how high it rates nor how much it pays."

"She'll make it, all right."

"Sure." The guard's eyes shifted away from Boone's. "Sure, Mister Boone. She'll make it."

Boone passed on.

Inside the personnel compound, he looked at his chronox again.

Only half an hour now till Eileen was scheduled to grav off.

Barely time for the job he had to do . . .

Turning in at his own quarters, he strode down the empty, echoing corridor to his room; closed the door behind him.

The nerve-gun lay in the top drawer, as always — sleek, grim, coldly lethal. Stiff-fingered, Boone checked the charge, then slid the

weapon beneath his blouse and turned to go.

But Eileen's picture on the corner stand caught him . . . held him.

Her picture, and the memories that went with it.

He picked it up; stared at it.

She was wearing her first uniform, with its student stripes, the silver comet Cartel insignia shining against the dark blue of the lapels. But even official tailoring and close-combed regulation hair-do couldn't hide her radiance. The blue eyes laughed with sheer love of living. Her lips showed soft and smiling, better styled for kisses than commands.

That was the Eileen Rey whom he remembered . . . the Eileen of his own student unit days, the girl who'd climbed rank after rank beside him through Interplanetary Cartels' service.

Till now . . .

He cursed Krobis under his breath, slapped the picture back, face down on the cabinet.

There was another guard at the gate to the Titan ramp. Boone bared his ID plate.

But the man made no move to step aside. "Sorry, Mister Boone."

"What—?"

"Mister Krobis' orders, sir. You are barred from the ramp till after the ship gravs off."

"Oh." For a long, long moment Boone stood very still. And then: "I see."

"He might still be at his office, sir. Maybe if you was to talk to him . . ."

"Thanks." Stiffly, Boone turned and walked back the way he'd come, past silent warehouses and noisy shops and rattling, rumbling surface carrier units.

Then he was in front of the blank-faced central administration building.

For the fraction of a second only, he hesitated. Then, turning in, he strode through the deserted passageways.

Krobis' office. Another guard. "Mister Krobis is busy, sir. He left orders that he wasn't to be disturbed till after the Titan ship gravs off."

Again, a long, long moment of decision. Then, very gently, Boone repeated, "I want to see Krobis."

"I'm sorry, sir—"

BOONE brought out the nerve-gun in one swift motion, leveled it at the man's belly. "Maybe you didn't understand."

The guard's eyes flicked from his face to the nerve-gun. "You're making a mistake, sir."

Boone kept the nerve-gun steady, ready. "You're probably right. But anyone who tries to

stop me is going to get hurt."

"If that's the way you want it, sir . . ." The guard shrugged and stepped aside.

"No." Boone shook his head. "You're going in with me, friend. Ahead of me."

Wordless, the guard shrugged again and, turning, walked through the anteroom towards Krobis' door.

Boone spun the nerve-gun's impact dial down to the temporary paralysis level and fired.

The guard crumpled. Stepping across him, Boone tried the door handle.

It was locked.

Sucking in a quick breath, Boone kicked for the bolt with all his might.

The door burst open. He lunged into the office beyond.

It was a big room, with the desk set at the far end so that visitors would have plenty of time to lose self-confidence while they walked its length.

Martin Krobis specialized in tricks like that.

He leaped up as Boone came through the door—face stiff, nostrils flaring.

Then: "Boone—I"

"That's right." Boone heeled the door shut behind you. "You're a hard man to see these days, Krobis. This time I couldn't wait."

Krobis straightened slowly, a

small, sharp-featured man with too-short legs. Twin spots of color came to mark his cheekbones, and his black eyes grew hard and shiny. "I don't believe I understand you, Boone."

Boone laughed, harsh and bitter. "You understand, all right. He strode forward. "That's why you gave orders to the guards to keep me away from you and off the ramp."

"So—?" This out of a thin-lipped, mask-like face.

"So Eileen Rey doesn't take the Titan run." Boone gestured with the gun. "Let's go, Krobis."

"You realize what you're doing, of course, Boone?" A raw, raging edge crept into Krobis' voice. "You know that this finishes you with IC? That as soon as my report goes in, it's the end of your career?"

Deliberately, Boone spun the nerve-gun's dial to the lethal output point. "Time's too short for talk, Krobis. We're going out to the ramp. You and me, together."

Again, Krobis' nostrils flared. His shoulders drew in. His head thrust a fraction forward.

Boone tightened his finger on the nerve-gun's trigger. "Try it, Krobis. Just try it."

Silence. Long, aching seconds of silence.

Then, slowly, Krobis' head came

up. He made a business of smoothing his sleek black hair and came around the desk, walking with the peculiar, waddling stride that came of trying to stretch his too-short legs farther than they were meant to go.

He hadn't done quite a good enough job on his hairline, either, Boone noted. Tiny beads of sweat still showed at the roots.

"Well, Boone?" Krobis carved the words out of ice.

Stripping a coat from the rack, Boone draped it over his arm to hide the gun, then fell in at Krobis' left, not quite abreast him. In silence, they went through the anteroom where the stunned guard lay and on out of the administration building.

Again, the ramp gate loomed.

Low-voiced, Boone said, "I'm going aboard that Titan ship, Krobis. See that I get there if you want to live."

Krobis didn't answer. But his curt nod took them past the guard.

**A**HEAD, the great sphere that was the Titan ship glinted under the forspark lights. The cargo hatches were already sealed. The last of the surface carriers shuttled in and out like rumbling beetles through the shadows cast by the stubby tripod legs.

Boone herded Krobis to the

loading shaft, into the lift; threw a tight grin at the man on duty. "How long?"

"Seven minutes, sir. We're right on schedule."

"Good enough."

The lift ground upward . . . halted, finally, deep in the heart of the ship.

Boone prodded Krobis down the narrow, duroid corridor that led to the tech quarters. The card on the last door to the right said, "Miss Rey."

Boone knocked. The tension was almost unbearable now. His palms were slick. His belly quivered.

A latch-click. The door opened part way, framing Eileen's face.

Shoving Krobis ahead of him, Boone crowded her back into the cabin and shouldered shut the door.

She stared. "What—?"

Krobis spoke rapidly, caustically: "Boone's jealous of your new assignment, my dear. He doesn't want to let you go to Titan."

Eileen caught her breath. Her eyes flicked to Boone. "Fred—"

"You can believe that if you want to, Eileen." Boone quit trying to keep the anger, the tension, out of his own voice. "The main thing is, you're not going."

He could see the storm flare in her eyes. "Fred, you can't stop

me!"

"Can't I?" Boone tossed the coat from his arm, baring the nerve-gun. "I've watched Krobis run through this big-boss act before, Eileen. He specializes in putting people under obligation. In your case, he knows how much your work means to you, so he'd like to maneuver things around to where you'll feel indebted to him for letting you prove your professional competency at the top level. Only this gun,"—he gestured with it — "says he's not going to get away with it."

The curves of Eileen's face changed to planes and hollows. A thin white anger-line drew about her mouth. "Fred, this is utterly absurd!"

And from Krobis: "Miss Rey happens to be one of the Cartel's best extraterrestrial biologists—"

Boone slashed in on him: "—And also, at the moment, she's a woman you want." He laughed—savagely, explosively. "A nice coincidence, isn't it? You'd gamble her life on it—send her into a chunk of void where monsters materialize out of nowhere and two ships in three never come back. If she lives and cracks the nut, figures out how those nightmares get aboard our ships and why, mekronal production and your rating—with Eileen and IC both — go

sky-high. If she dies, you chalk up another score for yourself as an ironclad Cartel man so set on his job that he doesn't know what sentiment means. Either way, Martin Krobis wins."

"Then you'd let this ship go out without a biologist?" Eileen's breath came fast and shallow. "You'd let the crew face the monsters with not even a fighting chance to win?"

Boone clipped his words: "Don't worry. There'll be a biologist aboard." And then: "You see—I'm going in your place."

"So—!" Face alight, Krobis turned to Eileen. "I was right, my dear! Boone's jealous, that's all—jealous of you, your ability, the chance I've given you to solve this problem!"

A tremor ran through Eileen. For an instant she swayed, her pale face a mask of mixed emotions.

Then, heedless of the nerve-gun, she clawed at Boone.

He stepped back fast; clubbed his left fist upward.

It caught her squarely on the point of the jaw. Her teeth clicked; her head snapped back. Already sagging, she reeled against the wall, then slid unconscious to the floor.

Krobis started to spin about.

Boone said tightly, "Come ahead, Krobis! Eileen I wouldn't

burn. But you—it'd be a pleasure!"

Krobis froze in his tracks.

**B**OONE shot a quick glance at his chronox. "Less than four minutes till grav-off. We'll have to hurry." He gestured with the nerve-gun barrel. "Get her up!"

"And if I won't?"

"Get her up I said!" Boone's voice rang savage with menace.

Krobis' eyes wavered. Squatting, he dragged Eileen's limp body round till he could slide an arm beneath her and heave her up on to his shoulder.

Boone closed in to help support her. "You know what to tell the man at the lift, Krobis: Miss Rey's suddenly been taken ill, so you're relieving her from duty and assigning me to take her place."

Black eyes asmsoulder, Krobis nodded.

"And in case you've got any sharp ideas — just remember no man alive can outrun a nerve charge . . ." Sliding his hand up under Eileen's service blouse to conceal his weapon, Boone jerked open the cabin door. In seconds, they had Eileen into the lift.

Then they were past the guard . . . out on the ramp again . . . into the black shadows on the far side of an emptied cargo carrier.

Boone stepped back while Krobis

awkwardly lowered Eileen to the ramp. She moaned a little; that was all.

Barely two minutes till grav-time now, the chronox said.

Krobis straightened. "You'll never get away with this, Boone!" His voice was thick with hate.

"Because you'll stop the grav-off, you mean?" Boone spun the nerve-gun's dial back to the temporary paralysis level. "I've thought of that, too, Krobis."

He squeezed the trigger.

The other's eyes went blank and glassy. He slumped beside Eileen on the ramp.

Pivoting, Boone strode back to the ship.

The hatchmen were already gathering with their sealers. The hum of the converters rose in an all-pervasive drone.

Up in the tech quarters once more, Boone wryly slipped the card bearing Eileen's name from its bracket on the door and substituted his own. Then, going on into the cabin, he threw himself down at full length on the foamex bunk. He was tired, more tired than he could remember ever having been, with the utter weariness that comes of too much strain and tension.

A moment later the signal light above the door flashed red. Then a momentary shifting said that the

sphere was off the ground and rising, riding its great beam of anti-gravitational force up from Ganymede's bleak surface.

So it was done. Eileen was safe at last and he, Fred Boone, was on his way to Titan.

Of course, there'd be charges waiting for him when he got back.

*If he got back,*

Only that could wait. That was still far off in the future.

HE fell asleep that way . . . a troubled sleep, full of mad, distorted dreams of Eileen and Krobis, and of monsters.

Then, all at once, he was awake again, sitting bolt upright in the bunk — sweat-drenched, fists clenched.

Dimly, confusedly, he sensed that some sound must have roused him.

In the same instant the sound came again — a knock, echoing over-loud in the cabin's stillness.

Stumbling from the bunk, Boone jerked open the door.

Eileen stood in the corridor outside, flanked by two guards with nerve-guns at the ready. A cold-eyed ship's officer waited behind them.

Boone stared—unable to speak, still not quite believing.

"I believe these are my quarters, Mister Boone," Eileen said.

She was a picture of chill self-possession. Only a faint trace of color marked the place along her jaw where he had struck her.

"Eileen—!" he choked. "Eileen . . ."

"You're surprised, you mean?" Her voice stayed icy. "I thought you might be. It's just that you didn't hit me quite as hard as you thought you did. I was conscious again before you ever carried me out of this cabin. But you had a gun, so I let you take me off, then came back on again just behind you."

"I see," Boone nodded slowly. Of a sudden there was a churning weakness in his middle. "Then—Eileen—"

"Miss Rey," she corrected, voice still icy. And then: "You'll understand, of course, that I had no choice but to take this whole thing to the captain."

Again, Boone nodded. "Yes."

"To return to Ganymede once the locks were closed behind us would be an expensive undertaking. So we'll both go on to Titan. I'll serve as biologist for the run, in accordance with my orders. As for you"—she shrugged—"your status should be obvious."

"To you, maybe. Not to me."

"Then I'll clarify it." All at once her eyes, her face, mirrored bitter triumph. "You'll make the

trip, Mister Boone, but you'll do it as a prisoner—under guard and confined to your quarters!"

## CHAPTER TWO

THE captain was a broad-bodied, heavy-shouldered man with the veined red nose and cheeks of a heavy drinker. The cold-eyed way he looked at Boone, low-lidded, told how he felt.

"Don't think I've turned you loose because I like you, Boone," he clipped. "I don't. But we're coming into Saturn's orbit, and that means we need a biologist on duty. Prisoner or not, you qualify, so you're elected."

Boone stared. "Miss Rey—"

"Her temperature hit 104 an hour ago."

A chill ran through Boone. "You mean—"

"That's right. Titan fever."

Boone caught his breath as the door swung open to admit a thin-faced young ensign. "Another down, Captain," the man reported grimly. "Verdov, converter crew."

"That makes four. Thank the good Lord we've got plenty of chandak extract." The captain hunched forward, his thick forearms heavy on the desk. "You see where it puts us, Boone. From here on in it's monster country; we'll

pass Japetus any minute. So the quicker you check the ship, the better."

"Right." Dry-lipped, Boone pivoted and strode towards the door, gesturing to the ensign. "Come on."

The other nodded and fell in beside him. "Where do you want to start?"

"Top live cargo section."

Together they rode the lift to the highest level, then walked to the end of the "A" passage.

Boone kicked the hatch of the first bunker. "Open it up."

"Open it—?" The ensign's eyes widened. "You mean you're going to check inside, too?"

Boone nodded curtly. "That's right."

"Well, if you say so . . ." Frowning, the ensign broke the seal; swung back the hatch.

Cold air washed over them. Light glinted on the seven-foot synthice slabs stacked floor to ceiling, each casing a contract worker stiff in frozen sleep.

Narrow-eyed, Boone probed each nook and crevice with his light-rod, then stepped back. "All right. Let's have the next one."

The ensign slammed shut the hatch. He studied Boone curiously. "Just what are you looking for?"

Boone shrugged. "Monsters



don't come out of nowhere; not really. My bet is that they get aboard our ships at the Titan base—in embryo, maybe, or as a virus. If we can spot one before it's grown to a full-scale nightmare, it may give us a hint as to how to beat them."

"But they say they're human, sometimes—"

"Maybe. But no man I know can appear and disappear at will, and so far we're the only humanoid race we've found anywhere in the system. Till I see more proof, I'll put my money on alien life-forms plus optical illusion."

"Oh." The ensign's brows drew together. He opened the next hatch.

Another blank.

It went on like that, section after section. They checked supply storage, power receptors, converters.

Still nothing.

In the control room, when they got there, Japetus was already fading from the visiscreen. Hyperion loomed ahead, a bead-like dot hovering in the shadow of the Rings.

Beyond it, dim and distant, lay Titan.

Titan, greatest satellite of Saturn, nearly half the size of Earth itself. Titan, that had given Man mekronal, the precious, mysterious catalyst that cut loose the hu-

man race from the need for the oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere of its homeland.

Titan, world of lost sphere-ships and phantasmic monsters.

Bleakly, Boone wondered if he'd ever reach it.

Or even if he did, would Eileen Rey live to see it with him? What were the odds against a woman struck down by Titan fever?

Those were questions without answers.

Weary, tight-lipped, he turned from the screen. "Nothing here. Let's try the crew quarters."

"Good enough." Once again, the ensign fell in beside him.

Overhead, the alarm bell clanged.

**B**OONE went rigid; spun about as the com-box crackled, raw and ragged: "Top level calling! There's something in "A" passage—something awful! Get the biologist— Oh, my God—!"

A scream: the scream of a soul in torment.

The com-box went dead.

The ensign at his heels, Boone raced for the lift-shaft.

The top level, "A" passage. The lights at the far end were out.

Boone snatched the ensign's nerve-gun. Cat-footed, he moved forward.

Ahead, something shifted in the

shadows. He became aware of a vague, phosphorescent glow.

A whisper of sound. A floundering wallow of movement.

Raw-nerved, Boone flicked on his light-rod.

Its beam sprayed out across a creature like nothing ever seen before in earth or heaven. A bulbous thing, a nightmare of pseudopodal horror.

But before he could fire, it began to change.

First it drew together, a bubbling mass like green calf-slobber shot with blood. A rank stench of musty death curled to him from it.

Then, while he watched, a shape began to rise out of the slime; a shape—

He caught his breath. His blood froze.

*It was a woman!*

Now she stood erect and naked, shrouded from the hips down in the slime-mass. Her hands caressed her high, proud breasts. She laughed and stretched her arms out toward Boone.

In spite of himself, he took a dragging step forward. Then another, and another.

As from afar, the ensign's shout dinned in his ears. He half turned.

As one, woman and slime-mass lunged towards him. And now, in-

credibly, Boone saw that there were fangs beneath the laughing lips; that, like Medusa, the woman was crowned not with rippling hair, but writhing serpents.

He screamed as the voice on the com-box had screamed; blazed point-blank at the naked belly with his nerve-gun.

The soft flesh shimmered, darkened. Great scales took form. The smooth body distorted into the plated, cartilaginous torso of a dragon.

Boone hurled himself aside as its great horned head lanced forward. With all his might, he threw the nerve-gun into the yawning mouth.

The mighty jaws clamped down. The metal crumpled.

Behind Boone, thunder crashed in the passage. A fire-bolt from a blaster smashed into the monster.

Dragon and slime-mass alike exploded into spattering fragments. Half-stunned, Boone felt the ensign's fingers dig into his shoulders and drag him back towards the lift-shaft.

But he shook them off. "No. I've got to see—" Even as he spoke, he knew that the words were coming out an incoherent mumble.

He staggered back anyhow . . . clawed amid the smoke and debris.

His hands came up green and stinking with viscous slime.

Numbly, he stared down at them. "Then—it was real—no optical illusion—"

"Real? Of course it was real!" This from the half-hysterical ensign. "I saw it all—the woman, the dragon! If I'd been two seconds later with the blaster, it would have got you!"

Boone slumped against the wall. "That thing—"

A MUFFLED crash of sound from the lift-shaft cut in on him. Red lights flashed on the call-board.

"Third level—!" The ensign's voice rang raw with tension.

"Come on!" Boone lunged for the lift.

Together they plummeted downward . . . stumbled out into a murky, smoke-eddy third level passage.

More slime, purple this time, and a man with a blaster.

Only he hadn't fired quite quick enough. He sprawled dead on the floor-plates, his chest torn wide open as if by talons.

Red lights were flashing all over the call-board now. Alarm bells jangled wildly.

The captain's voice rasped from the com-box: "All hands! Make for your closest emergency carrier

and stand by to abandon ship! Central Control will blow all carriers clear in three minutes! Repeat, Central Control will blow all carriers clear in three minutes, so get aboard fast! All hands . . ."

Stiff-lipped, Boone stared up at the call-board. "Seven levels signalling! It's an attack in force, then . . ."

The ensign clutched his arm. "Let's go! There's a carrier at the end of the passage!"

Boone started to turn, then stopped short. "Eileen—!"

"What?"

"The other biologist—the girl with Titan fever."

"Let the medmen worry about her! They'll take her off if she's not too sick to move!"

"No!" Spasmodically, Boone jerked free. "We can't leave her!"

"But there's no time!"

"I can't help that." Boone shoved the other away. "You go ahead . . ."

The ensign threw him one last taut, frustrated glance, then wheeled and ran off down the passage towards the carrier lock. A score of steps he ran . . .

Only then, out of the murk, a primordial horror rose before him—a thing of tentacles and feelers massed about a hideous white skull-face.

It happened too fast for shouts

or screaming. The ensign's head jerked back and sidewise. He tried to veer.

Too late.. With a sound that came straight from hell, the skull-thing lurched forward. The tentacles engulfed him.

Convulsively, Boone clawed the blaster from the dead hands of the man beside the lift-shaft . . . lanced a fire-bolt into the monster's leering face.

Face and monster vanished in a blaze of ear-shattering sound and blue-white flame.

Then the echoes died and Boone was alone again—shaking, retching. Of the ensign, no trace remained.

**N**UMBLY, Boone stumbled back into the lift and dropped it fullspeed down the shaft to the tenth level, the very heart of the great sphere-ship.

There was another monster waiting for him when he came out—a creature that looked for all the world like a huge, iridescent coffin whose lid came up to bare rows of razor-edged shark-teeth.

Raw-nerved, he blasted it to atoms; then, belly churning, waded through stench and putrescent fragments towards the tech quarters where Eileen lay.

As he did so, the ship rocked sharply.

For an instant Boone went rigid,

then cursed aloud. That jolt—it could have been only the impact of the carriers' departure.

Now, truly, he was alone—alone in the void on a sphere of death, where nightmare monsters roamed lusting for his blood.

Alone with Eileen, perhaps. If she were still alive.

*If . . .*

He quickened his pace, moving along the corridor cold-eyed and wary, his finger taut on the blaster's trigger.

The last door to the right. A card that said, "Miss Rey."

Palm slick with sweat, Boone tried the handle.

The door was unlocked. He opened it a fraction.

A voice rose high and incoherent, ranting. The voice of delirium.

Boone stepped inside; flicked on the light.

Eileen lay in the bunk, held there by the broad straps of a safety pack. A flush-faced Eileen with wild, fever-blinded eyes. Her lips moved in ceaseless, garbled speech. Thin fingers tugged and twisted at the sheets as if it were not in them to be still.

A knot drew tight in Boone's midriff. Grimly, he studied the chart on the stand, then glanced at his chronox.

Time for more chandak extract.

Stiff-fingered, he prepared the aerojet; sprayed the precious drops into Eileen's jugular vein. Then, barring the door against invading monsters, he settled down to wait and hope.

The hours dragged by till he lost track, a blur of time broken only by the routine with the aerojet. Once he thought Eileen recognized him. Twice he fell asleep. A dozen times, in his mind's eye, the monsters came, only to fade away again as he fought his way up from the depths of his fatigue. Hunger, thirst—they were words only . . .

Then, the crash.

It threw him clear across the cabin, to land with stunning force against the farthest wall. The whole room hung tilted at a thirty-degree angle.

Dragging himself up, he clambered to the bunk.

Eileen's eyes were closed, her tongue and fingers still at last. To Boone, it seemed as if her forehead were less feverish—as if she might even be asleep.

But again, she might have slipped into a coma. In his own state, he couldn't be sure.

As for the crash, the room—Blinking, he looked around.

The cabin's angle was still the same. Thirty degrees, at least.

Only the room couldn't stay this way, tilted. Not with the sphere

floating free in space. That was what the orientational gyroscopes were designed to prevent.

In the same instant, he caught the first faint whiff of ammonia.

A chill ran through him. Scrambling erect, he snatched up the blaster, fumbled open the door, and peered out into the corridor.

No monsters — but something worse. For here the ammonia-smell hung even stronger.

**D**RAGGING the door shut behind him, Boone half-ran half-fell along the crazily-tilted passage to the administrative center at the ship's core.

The door to the medical office was locked. Cursing savagely, Boone drew back and to one side and fired a glancing bolt.

The door swung wide, the lock and half the panel shattered.

Inside, Boone pawed the supply chest into chaos, then turned to the wall cabinets.

A case of mekronal ampules stood on the first shelf.

Coughing as a new eddy of ammonia fumes curled round him, Boone snatched down the carton and an extra aerojet injector, then ran from the room and back along the passage to Eileen's cabin.

The air inside was a little better. Slamming shut the door, he tossed down the ampules and be-

gan wadding the first of Eileen's garments to come to hand into the wall vent.

A faint voice whispered, "Fred . . ."

Boone spun around. "Eileen—!"

She smiled, the pale wraith of a smile. But her eyes had lost their fever-wildness. Her cheeks were no longer quite so flushed.

"What's . . . the matter, Fred?"

"Nothing. Nothing." Futilely, Boone groped for some convincing fable. "It's just—you've been down with Titan fever—"

"Don't . . . lie to me, Fred. Please tell me." And then: "Were there . . . monsters—?"

Of a sudden Boone could no longer face her. "Yes, there were monsters." He pivoted; stuffed more clothing into the air vent. "All hands took off in carriers. Now the ship's crashed—on Hyperion, maybe; someplace with an ammonia - and - methane atmosphere, anyhow. The plates must have sprung when we hit. The smudge outside is leaking in."

"Then—what—?"

Boone finished with the vent. Sliding down to the bunk, he tore open the mekronal case with unsteady fingers; drew out an ampule.

"We'll try it on mekronal," he answered in a voice gone flat in spite of him. "If we can last three

hours till it takes effect, we still may make it."

He readied the injector and sprayed the ampule's contents into Eileen's bloodstream, then shot a second into his own.

The girl's hand touched his; held it. "I'm . . . so tired . . ." Her eyes closed

She slept.

Seconds dragging by, melding into minutes. The cabin growing uncomfortably warm, the air stale and stuffy.

A half-hour gone. Time for another ampule.

Again and again, Boone read the legend on the carton: *Mekronal is an unanalyzed catalyst derived from the skeletal structure of the non-carbon chemistry life form Helgae found on Titan. When injected into the human bloodstream, it enables man to breath all known atmospheres, regardless of content, without toxic effect. Dosage: One ampule every thirty minutes till three ampules have been injected. Repeat weekly until return to normal oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. Takes effect within approximately three hours after first injection though an additional one-hour safety factor is recommended.*

"Takes effect within approximately three hours after first injection . . ."

Three endless hours.

Or the other line — "Enables man to breath all known atmospheres, regardless of content, without toxic effect."

Did that include carbon dioxide atmospheres like the one now forming in this cabin?

Bleakly, Boone wondered. He checked his chronox.

Time for the third injection.

Maybe it would be better to take no chances—move Eileen to a lower point, where the air was clearer.

Besides, the heat here by the bunk was becoming almost unbearable. Already, both of them were drenched with sweat.

*Sweat! Heat—!* Boone went rigid.

There shouldn't be any heat to speak of—not if they lay in a plate-sprung ship on Hyperion's frigid surface!

Then what—?

Boone could find no ready answer.

The air grew thicker, thicker. Eileen's breathing steadily became more labored.

**F**REEING her from the safety pack, Boone carried her to the room's lowest corner. She roused a little, then sank back once more, as if even consciousness had become an effort.

More seconds. More minutes.

Then, slowly, the pressure on Boone's lungs seemed to lift. Depression and weariness fell away. New energy flowed through him.

He dared a look at his chronox.

Three hours and seventeen minutes!

Of a sudden he was giddy with exaltation. He wanted to shout, to laugh and leap.

From the corner, Eileen whispered, "Fred, have we made it?"

Wordless, he stumbled to her.

Her eyes were open, cool and steady. The last flushed traces of fever had vanished.

"Eileen—!" he choked, "Eileen . . ." and strained her to him.

Then; because he could not trust his own emotions further, he rose and took up the blaster. "I'll go take a look around, get you something to eat."

The corridor outside was thick with the alien atmosphere. But though it stung his eyes a little, his lungs now accepted it without protest.

Watchful, wary of monsters, he made his way to the galleys and gathered up a sack of food, wolfing down a whole can of meat synthetic in the process.

Eileen was up and dressed when he returned. Grinning, he watched her eat with the eager hunger of the fever-famished.

When she had finished and he

got up to leave again, she rose also. "Fred, I'm going with you."

He shook his head. "You're too weak. You need to take it easy."

"Please, Fred."

For an instant his eyes met hers and he knew again that now, as always, he never could deny her. "All right. Just for a little way."

Together, his arm about her, they left the cabin . . . turned down the corridor that led to the nearest carrier lock.

The hatch hung free, sprung from its hinges. Bracing himself, Boone levered it open.

Eileen caught her breath. "Fred—!"

He twisted; stared out past her.

The sight that met his eyes set his senses reeling.

For here lay no frozen wastes, no icy crags and barrens.

Instead, a blaze of living color spread before him, kaleidoscopic in its brilliance. Huge flowers like none that he had ever seen carpeted the foreground in clumps of yellow, red, green, purple—every color of the rainbow. Strange trees stretched upward towards the shining blue vault of the sky, rustling and swaying in the gentle breeze.

"Fred—!" Eileen's hand rested on his shoulder. "Fred, it's beautiful!"

Her words broke the spell. "Beautiful? Yes, of course it is,"

Boone nodded, frowning. "But the question is, where are we? There's no planet like this anywhere in our whole solar system, so far as I know—"

He broke off; moved out into the carrier cradle proper, where he could get a broader field of vision.

To the right, the flowerland stretched away to rolling hills that spread as far as he could see.

To the left—

He went rigid.

Beyond the flower-fields, strange, low domes rose—grey-silver domes whose very lines and curves bespoke an alien pattern. One atop the other they piled in a jumbled, sprawling mass like bubbles trapped in cooling lava. Boone could only guess how many miles of ground they covered.

Yet it was a scene of a kind he'd seen before, once, on microreels in IC's confidential archives.

Behind him, Eileen caught her breath. "Those things—Fred, are they buildings?"

"Buildings?" Boone hesitated; fumbled. "I don't know. I guess that you might call them that."

"You guess—? Then you recognize them!" Eileen's blue eyes were suddenly worry-shadowed. "Tell me, Fred. Don't hold back. Is something wrong? Where are we?"

For a long, long moment Boone



stared away at the distant dome-pile. "No, nothing's wrong," he said at last. "Maybe it's even better luck than we could hope for." And then: "But wherever we are, Eileen, one thing's for certain: That place is a Helgae city!"

### CHAPTER III

IT was a situation that held Boone tense, uneasy.

On the one hand, the Helgae domes loomed over the paradisaical flowerland where the sphere-ship lay in strange, silent menace.

On the other, aboard the globe, he could not but chill to the recollection of the monsters.

As for Eileen . . . Boone wondered. She had said not a word about their earlier trouble — his desperation-born effort to keep her from making the Titan run; its sudden reversal and her triumph. Yet after the first moments of tenderness and relief at their own survival the clash hung like an invisible wall between them. Out of it, a reserve had come into being — a weighing of words, a wary watching.

Or was that only his imagination?

Regardless, they had to adjust to each other's presence; to work out some solution to their mutual problem.

Cautious exploration finally convinced him that the monsters had vanished from the ship as mysteriously as they'd come. It didn't surprise him; it had been the pattern in every such invasion—nightmare figures materializing out of the void to wreak chaos aboard the IC's Titan-bound craft, then disappearing again, back into whatever dark limbo they called home.

Too, the carrier towards which the dead ensign had been running when the monster seized him was still aboard; apparently the blast-charge had jammed its locks. So there was at least a slim chance for escape.

It was enough for Boone. He persuaded Eileen that, weak as she was, it would be best to stay in her cabin and eat and sleep and rest while they waited for night and stars that might give them some clue as to where they were.

For his own part, he moved from one empty carrier cradle to another, studying the landscape and the sky.

The effort brought only bafflement. Here and there in the distance, great mountains towered. But always, the blue of the heavens seemed to chop off their highest peaks, as if the sky were a translucent ceiling that they pierced.

Nor could he find the sun, save as a vague, luminous glow that

shifted slowly towards the far horizon.

Yet the astrogation microreels showed no satellite or planet short of Venus with an atmosphere thick enough to give such an effect.

Then, at last, the light began to fade. Eagerly, Boone waited for the stars.

Instead, a pitch-black night came down. Only in one tiny spot, almost directly over the fallen globe-ship, could he detect a spark of light.

Then it, too, vanished.

Boone cursed aloud.

But when, once again, he scanned the sky, the spark was back where it had been.

Or was it? Before, the glint had shone cold and blue. Now, it seemed to have a faint orange cast.

He settled down to watching it, as nearly without blinking as he could.

For a few minutes it grew brighter, then faded again till only ebon black remained.

Still Boone held his eyes on the place where it had been.

A dim, greenish glow, so pale he could not be sure that it was really there. Then a pin-prick of undeniable light.

Minutes, ticking by.

A rustle of movement. At his elbow, Eileen said, "Fred, that light—this black—I don't under-

stand."

"I'm afraid I do." Boone rubbed the stiffness from his neck and quit trying to watch the spark above. "We've always thought of the outer worlds as rock and ice. Where this one's concerned, we were wrong. There's ice, all right, but at least in places it's just a shell, with a warm pocket underneath."

He could hear Eileen's breath hiss in the darkness. "Then you mean—"

"Yes. We must have been crossing this planetoid's orbit when the crew abandoned ship. It's too small to have much gravity, but there was enough to pull us in. So we crashed through the ice-shell and landed here."

THE girl's body touched his. He could feel her shiver. "Then those lights we see are the stars as they pass above the hole we made? We'll have to go through it again to get back into space?"

"That's right." Boone put his arm about her shoulders. "It shouldn't be too hard. I'm betting this is Hyperion—and that means we are close enough to jump to Titan, even in a carrier. We'll know for sure when it gets light again. I can check the time from sunset to sunrise against the tables that show how long it takes Hyperion to re-

volve on its axis."

"You make it seem so easy." Eileen sighed. "In a way, I'm not even sure I want to go."

"That has a nice sound." Boone held her closer.

But she twisted. "No. It—it isn't what you think, Fred."

Boone let his arm fall. He frowned into the darkness. "Then why—?"

"Can't you guess?" All at once the girl sounded weary; almost bitter. "There's going to be trouble, Fred. Trouble with Krobis. You know that."

"Oh."

"He won't forget what you did. He'll break you for it. And—and I won't like that."

"You . . . won't like it?"

"You know I won't. You—you saved my life."

Boone could feel his muscles tensing. In spite of him, his voice came edged: "Then that's all that's bothering you? You just don't want to see me get in trouble?"

"No, no! —Oh, I don't know!" Eileen's words were suddenly stumbling and uneven. "It's just that—well, you showed me something, Fred, when you tried to stop me. How you feel about me. How my work doesn't really matter to you."

"I see." Boone's mood turned raw and savage. "Maybe you even

figure like Krobis pretended he did—that I was just jealous of your assignment when I barged in to this business."

"Fred!" And then: "You're trying to hurt me, Fred. I hurt you, so now you want to pay me back."

He didn't answer.

A moment of silence. At last Eileen said, "I—I think I'll go to bed. I'm still awfully tired. That fever . . ."

Her voice trailed away. Then, after another moment, her shoes whispered on the cradle-plates.

Still Boone stared bleakly out into the darkness.

The whispering footsteps, faded, died. He stood alone, in utter silence. Even the murmur of the breeze in the trees about the ship was stilled.

That stillness — it made him frown a little. It wasn't natural, somehow.

As a matter of fact, was anything natural in this weird, ice-shelled wonderland? Even the flowers lacked kinship with those he'd known on Earth.

Or did they?

It came to him in a flash that what he needed now was action. The night, the silence, the bitter disillusion — they'd rasped his nerves in a raw tension. Unless he cut it loose, something would snap.

The flowers, then, could serve as an outlet.

First, he'd get a light-rod . . .

Pivoting, he strode back along the carrier guides to the hatch . . . started to step through.

From the other side came the hiss of a quick-drawn breath.

Boone froze. "Eileen . . ."

A tremulous laugh. "Fred, I came back. I—I was afraid."

"Oh." He made it curt. "I'm going out as soon as I can find a light."

"I've got one." A beam blazed in the black, half-blinding him. "You're going—out—?"

"Yes. Down onto the ground. I want a closer look at some of those flowers."

It was a belligerent statement, geared for more trouble. But Eileen's tone stayed almost humble: "Can I come with you?"

"If you want to." Boone took the light-rod and, with no further words, led the way down to the sphere-ship's lowest level and out through another carrier-cradle.

**J**UST short of the mouth, he paused. Lowering himself carefully from the cradle-lip, he tested the ground.

It had the slightly spongy feel of thick carpeting, but there was no question but that it would hold his weight. Spraying the light out in

a quick arc, he checked for other dangers—of just what sort he wasn't sure—and then helped Eileen down.

Already, he felt better; perhaps even a trifle chagrined at the emotions that had brought him here.

But it wasn't in him to show that now. Crossing to the nearest flower-clump, he spread the petals of a half-opened bud.

They were gigantic—three times the size of any he'd ever seen before. Within the corolla lay half-a-dozen concentric rings of thread-like, sharply differentiated tendrils.

He frowned; spoke half to himself: "Which are the stamens?"

"Or are there any?" Eileen slid a fingernail across the rippling tendrils. "Maybe this is a different kind of plant than we know—one based on six sexes instead of two."

"Maybe." Still frowning, Boone picked another flower to study. Again, as earlier up in the carrier-cradle, he was acutely conscious of the blackness pressing in about them; the utter silence. It brought a queer prickling along his spine.

Eileen brushed against him. "Fred, why can't we let this wait till morning? After all, what do we know about this place, or the Helgae?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"The Helgae?" Stubbornly,

Boone shrugged off his own mood. "If they could do anything to humans, they'd have done it when IC started operations out on Titan. As for this place—" He tilted the light-rod up to illuminate the ground ahead.

Its beam stopped short a bare six feet before them, cut off as completely as by a wall.

Eileen clutched his arm. "Fred—!"

Boone whipped the beam left.

Six feet it carried; no more.

Whirling, he pointed it back in the direction from which they had come, squarely at the sphere-ship.

But there was no ship; or if there was, the light-beam could not reach it.

Panic gripped Boone—the black, surging panic that roars up in a tidal wave when Man stands face to face with the unknown. Dimly, he knew that Eileen had swayed against him; that instinctively he'd thrown his arm about her. That was all.

Yet in spite of it, now, he forced himself into striding forward—one creaking step . . . two . . . three . . .

The light-beam shortened with each step.

The truth dawned on him, then: The beam stopped short as if cut off by a wall . . . because, indeed, a wall had risen up before it!

A dull, translucent wall of silvery grey.

Numbly, he lanced the beam skyward.

There, too, it broke on the grey shell.

Boone's panic channeled into fury. He spun about; struck savagely at the barrier.

Blood spurted from split knuckles. The wall remained.

Twisting, he hurled his full weight against the barrier.

Again, it threw him back.

He straightened, then; swung round the light-rod, searching the shell for some flaw, some weakness.

He found none.

Beside him, Eileen was sobbing. "Fred, what's happened?"

"What's happened—?" Boone laughed, a harsh and bitter laugh. "We're trapped, Eileen; that's what: Trapped in a Helgae bubble like those domes we saw!"

Her tears died. She stared at him. "But the Helgae can't hurt humans—"

"They can't?" He threw out the query like a challenge. "What do we really know about it?"

"But—on Titan—"

"On Titan, we found what we thought was a dead or dying culture. No one's ever seen Helgae alive. Or maybe we have. They're a non-carbon chemistry life form. The elemental blobs we figured for

skeletal structure may actually be their version of organic matter. Our mekronal units could have been smashing the golden age of their civilization, for all we really know."

The girl's face blanched. "No! It can't be!"

"Why can't it?" Her opposition lashed Boone to new fierceness. Man's never found a way to communicate with any other life form—not even on our own home planet! We can't talk to ants or paramecium, let alone Martian torglors or Callistan crustachs. But we're egoists, so we've taken it for granted we're the only truly intelligent creatures. All over the system, we've moved in at will, taken what we wanted, because we had the power to do it. But maybe the Helgae are different. Maybe, on their plane, they can think as well as we, or better. Do you think they won't react when the Cartel rips apart their cities and hauls them off by millions for the sake of the mekronal that can be extracted from their bodies?"

**E**ILEEN drew back. Her eyes distended. "You're mad, Fred! The Helgae—they'd strike back if they were alive or had the power to think!"

"Maybe they have. Maybe that's the origin of Titan fever,

and the monsters that appear aboard our sphere-ships." Boone hammered on the shell that caged them. "Or would you like to deny this bubble, too? Whether it came down from above or grew up from below, it's here—and I, for one, can't break it!"

Eileen's lips were quivering. Her face averted. Her shoulders shook. "Fred—oh, Fred . . ."

Then she was crumpling. Barely in time, Boone caught her; held her.

What was there in him that made him strike out so at her? Jealously, as Krobis said? Frustration at their plight here? A projection of the rage he felt towards himself for having been fool enough to leave the security of the sphere-ship to come out here in the black night without decent reason?

Or was it as some forgotten poet had said in a line of verse that he remembered—"For each man kills the thing he loves . . ."

He cursed aloud.

The night dragged on, with Boone cradling the girl in his arms. There were no more words between them.

Then pale light came, filtered and dim within the grey translucence of the bubble. Eileen roused, suddenly wild-eyed and rigid. "Fred—"

"Easy, girl. We're still inside

the bubble." And then, to soothe her: "Don't worry. They wouldn't have taken the trouble to make us prisoners if they'd planned to kill us right away."

She didn't answer.

Wearily, Boone got up and started towards the shell's closest wall.

But as he did so, the ground seemed to come alive beneath his feet. Crackling and crumbling it tilted so sharply that he was pitched from his feet.

Then earth and flower-sod alike were sliding. Loose loam cascaded over Boone. Desperately, he tried to find Eileen amid the welter.

"Here, Fred! Behind you!"

Floundering, Boone craned to see her.

She stood close to the shell's wall, braced against it.

Then another tremblor threw him flat; half-buried him.

Clawing, cursing, he wallowed towards the girl.

She darted forward in the same instant. Her hand locked on his. With a final effort he shook free of the clods and lurched panting to a place at the wall beside her.

Another jolt. Again the earth slipped from beneath his feet. Yet now, since he had the wall to brace him, the surge of movement did not fell him.

Then it dawned on him that the shell itself was sliding, sliding up-

wards!

It was Eileen who gave the answer: "Lean back, Fred! The bubble's rolling, that's all. The dirt keeps sliding forward." Strangely, her voice was steady now; calm, almost.

After that, there was no more time for talking. Faster and faster, the grey sphere careened onward, bumping and bouncing. A dozen times, one or the other of them fell. But as long as they held their places against the rear wall, the earth and clods spilled away from them, so that with sweat and scrambling they managed each time to regain their footing.

Then, at long last, the strange globe slowed and changed direction. The surface beneath it seemed smoother now, and the bubble moved in arcs and curves. Shadows fell across it. The light grew dim, then faded altogether.

More movement, through long lanes of utter darkness. Strange sounds, faint whispers in the stillness.

Then, abruptly, light again—a blaze of it, dazzling and incandescent.

The bubble halted.

A crash of silent thunder, more felt than heard.

Its impact pitched Boone and Eileen forward into the dirt. The globe split into segments like a

quartered orange.

Half-stunned, they stared about.

IT was a chamber such as Boone had never seen before — a great, bare bubble-room whose very walls radiated chill white light.

Lurching to his feet, he stumbled down from the tumbled earth.

Two steps he took. And then, incredibly, he could go no further, for out of nowhere, a new bubble, crystal clear and barely large enough for him to stand erect, had formed around him.

He spun about.

Like him, Eileen stood in a solitary global prison. Stiff-faced with fear, she gestured to him—helpless, hopeless.

He hammered at the shimmering wall in furious frenzy. But to no avail. The casing gave no more than had that of the cell in which he and Eileen had come.

His sphere began to move away from Eileen's, then. Like a huge ball it rolled, spinning out in an arc that carried it through some unseen exit that led from the chamber of chill white light.

Darkness again.

But only briefly, this time. Then, once more, the globe halted. New light came, a warm and golden glow.

Again, Boone peered forth.

Now he lay in a sort of amphi-

theatre, it seemed—a bubble joined on all sides by a thousand other, smaller bubbles.

Each lesser sphere held one of the Helgae.

Fascinated, Boone studied them through the clear walls of his cage; and never did man look on stranger creatures.

For their bodies were mottled, shapeless blobs—limbless, with no visible trace of sensory organs. They could as well have been lumps of mud or metal, for all that Boone could see.

Perhaps the men at the Titan base had been right. It outraged human reason even to dream that such things could have intelligent, independent life.

Only then an alien thought flashed through Boone's mind — a thought without meaning, couched in terms no mammalian brain could ever have defined.

Boone groped; floundered.

Another thought-tendrill reached him, even less translatable than the first. He felt an uneasiness, a twinge almost of conscience, as if this were a thing that duty demanded he should grasp.

But effort made no slightest difference. Though he strained till his temples throbbed, the concept remained beyond his powers to understand.

Shaking, he gripped his head



between his hands.

Now the patterns came in dozens, hundreds. Boone's brain reeled under their impact. He staggered, cried out in helpless fury.

As swiftly as they had come, the alien intellects withdrew.

Weak, drenched with sweat, Boone slumped to the bottom of his sphere.

As he did so, the golden glow that bathed him changed to deepest purple.

Taut, eyes flickering, Boone watched and waited.

Slowly, a new sensation came.

This time, there was no alien thought-projection — if, indeed, it had been that which he had felt before.

Rather, now, the other minds were probing his own brain-cells — searching his cortex with tendrils a thousand times more delicate than Man's finest nerve-ends; wringing out his thoughts as one might squeeze water from a sponge. There was a laying-bare of dreams dredged from the deep subconscious, a draining off of skills and knowledge.

And agony came with it—an agony that rose from soul, not body; a pain that seared beyond all human ken. Through a thousand years it stretched, that pain—a thousand years when seconds lasted eons.

Boone writhed and screamed. At least, he thought he did. For never, never, so long as he should live, could he be quite sure.

Yet he knew, somehow, that, lacking a universe of discourse, the things the Helgae sought most were still locked in his brain. Like him, they could not bridge the chasm that yawned between such different minds.

Then it was over and the glow of purple, too, was fading. The probing minds drew back their tendrils. Boone's sphere dissolved into a place of glorious, delirium-born darkness and he was falling . . . falling . . .

## CHAPTER IV

**I**T was a wondrous world. He walked in halls of polished marble and looked out through colonnades across a bright blue sea. Gentle breezes carried flowers' perfumes to him. Wine warmed his throat. Music rippled in faint, nostalgic waves.

Yet he knew no joy, for loneliness ached dull underneath his breastbone. First listless, then feverish, he wandered in and out among the columns, ever seeking. Servitors brought rare foods, sun-blushing fruits, to tempt his palate; and there were women who pressed themselves upon him, seducing him

with eye and voice and touch.

But he brushed by; he would have none of them. He saw the blue sea as a wasteland. The wine turned bitter in his mouth.

Then, suddenly, *she* was there, a fairy figure far off amid the towering pillars. With a glad cry, he ran towards her.

But she laughed and flitted away before him. And when he tried to follow, dusk came, casting ebon shadows, and he could not find her, and he threw himself down on the hard bed of the marble, bruised and broken.

"Eileen—!" he moaned. "Eileen . . ."

As from afar, a voice said, "That's right. Another shot of vorghon."

He turned his head, ever so slowly. He forced his burning, heavy-lidded eyes to open.

A man in the white jacket of the medcorps stood beside him, smiling. "Good," the man said. "I knew we'd do it. Vorghon always brings them around."

"You hit it, all right." It was another medman speaking. "For awhile there, I'd begun to wonder. But that last shot turned the trick."

Again Boone whispered: "Eileen—where is she?"

"Eileen, did you say? The first of the medmen came down closer. "Some girl? You were alone, you

know, aboard the carrier."

"The . . . carrier—?"

"You don't remember that part, even?" The medman's brow furrowed deeper. His eyes flicked to his fellow for the fraction of a second as if in wordless exclamation, then came back to Boone again. "You were aboard a sphere-ship bound for Titan. Then the monsters hit it and all hands took off. When we picked you up, you were in an EC carrier, drifting just out of Hyperion's orbit." He chuckled. "You were out of your head at the time. Someplace along the line you'd gotten pretty sick."

Boone tried to drag himself up but found his arms were pinioned. "I was on Hyperion!" he mumbled. "I didn't leave the ship; it crashed down through the ice-shell. Eileen was with me—"

But the medman had straightened. He was not listening. "Another shot for this lad," he clipped briskly. "Make it equal parts of vorghon and anahalsax."

"Right, sir," the second medman nodded. Boone glimpsed an aero-jet descending.

Then he was off again—off on another nightmare chase, following Eileen through sifting spheres of light and darkness.

This time, at last, he caught her. Only when he would have put his arms about her, she suddenly

changed into a faceless, somehow leering Helgae.

But the haze was gone when he roused again, and he felt better.

Then the medmen came in, looking not quite so jovial as before. A frozen-faced ship's officer entered with them.

There was the usual routine check. At its conclusion, the medman in charge turned to the officer. "All right. You can talk to him now." He stepped back.

THE officer moved in closer. "Your name's Fred Boone, EB rating, attached to the Ganymedan base." He said it as if it were an accusation.

"That's right."

"On September 3, 2156, adjusted Earth dating system, you forced the base director, Martin Krobis, to pass you onto the base grav-ramp, then paralyzed him with a nerve-shock and stowed away aboard sphere-ship XL-230, bound for Titan, in direct violation of his specific orders."

Boone studied the officer thoughtfully, but said nothing.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

The officer's ears grew pink. "Affirm or deny."

"I'd rather not do either till I have advice of counsel."

"Oh. One of those." The of-

ficer's lips drew tight. "All right, then, if that's the way you want it. But I warn you, it won't help you."

Turning on his heel, he stalked out the door. The medmen followed.

Still Boone lay unmoving. There was a tension in him now, and of a sudden he felt old and weary.

So even here, even now, after all that had happened, Krobis was bound to get his pound of flesh.

Almost idly, he wondered how it would end.

Not that it mattered. Not now, with Eileen still back on Hyperion, a captive of the Helgae.

If she'd lived this long.

Bleakly, he wondered what had happened that day — or was it night?—in the weird domed city. Were the Helgae living entities, as it had seemed? Had they really tried to probe his brain by some strange thought-wave system? Or was that all imagination?

For that matter, had he ever actually been beneath the ice-shell? Did it even exist? And was there a warm, lush world inside it—a world where huge, six-sexed flowers bloomed and held their colors in spite of ammonia and methane; where Helgae bubbles formed in a flash to trap invaders?

Above all, how had he come to be aboard a carrier, drifting be-

yond Hyperion's orbit?

Those were questions to which, some day, he'd have to find the answers.

Such questions—! And so many of them!

Yet in his heart he knew that they were academic, almost. For they only concealed the true core of his tension.

Eileen.

Again he saw her as in those last long moments—sealed in her separate sphere, her pale face fear-straight.

The memory woke new fever in him. Why was he lying here, with her in danger? Now, above all, seconds were precious!

And there was only one road for him to take to help her.

A bitter road. Yet he had no choice.

He shifted; twisted; fumbled for the buzzer button.

A medman came. Boone said, "I want a space-phone."

"Who are you calling?"

"The Ganymedan base director. His name is Martin Krobis."

"I'll see." The man went out again.

When he came back, he brought an audio-visual com-box with him. "The call's allowed. I've placed it for you." Setting down the unit on the stand beside Boone's bed, he left the room.

Taut-nerved, Boone waited.

Then the signal blinked. Krobis' face flashed on the receptor-screen, sharp features set in an expression that was half gloating smirk, half chill, bleak menace. "Well, Boone?" His voice came brittle.

Boone hunched forward. "Let's not waste time on things past, Krobis. We know how we feel about each other. What counts now is that Eileen's in trouble."

Tersely, he told his story.

But Krobis' expression stayed the same. The black eyes showed no slightest flicker of emotion.

"That's all, Boone?"

Boone's palms were sweating. "That's all"—? he echoed. "Isn't that enough? What more do you want."

FOR the first time, Krobis' facial muscles shifted. Hate boiled in his eyes. His lips peeled back in a raging grimace. "I want you, Boone!" he slashed out fiercely. "I want you, and I'm going to get you! Before I'm through, you'll be booted out of Cartel service and rubbing *djec* in Venus barracks. This nonsense you've told me—"—he laughed, a harsh, contemptuous laugh—"—do you think I don't see through it? Not even a cadet on his first trip would swallow it! You're trying to save your own neck, that's all.

But it won't work, not for a minute—"

"But Eileen—"

"To hell with her, too! Even if I believed you, my job's in Mekronal, not Rescue Service!"

He broke off sharply, as if unable to find words harsh enough to vent his fury. His hand blurred as he flicked the switch.

The screen went dead.

Belly quivering, Boone turned off his own unit and slumped back on the bed.

But before he could even sort out his own feelings, the com-box signal blinked again.

For the fraction of a second Boone hesitated, nonplussed and frowning, then threw the switch.

This time the face on the screen was one he hadn't seen before: a stern-faced man with greying hair, all dignity.

The other said, "I'm Douglas Schilling, specialist in space law at Thelema. A mutual friend heard about your current difficulties. He suggested that you might like to have me serve as counsel."

Boone stared. "A mutual friend—"

"Yes," Schilling nodded. "He prefers that I not use his name over the space-phone, but he said you'd remember him as the man to whom you were talking in Gandor City just before you left for Titan."

Gandor City—! Boone rocked. That could only be Terral, the representative of Associated Independents!

"Do you remember?" Schilling prodded.

Boone made his face a mask. "Yes. I remember."

"Then if you'd care to have me represent you—"

"I would." Boone leaned back and smiled thinly. "That is, if you're still willing after you've heard my story. Krobis has already turned it down."

"Krobis—!" The other's keen eyes flickered. "You mean you've talked to him, given him the details as to what happened?"

"Yes."

"I can't say that I'm glad to hear it. However . . ." The lawyer shrugged. "Let's make it that I'll see you when your ship grays down at the Cartel's Thelema headquarters base on Mars tomorrow."

"Good enough."

"Till tomorrow, then . . ." Already, the lawyer's face was fading.

**T**OMORROW. To Boone, it seemed that the hours dragged on beyond measure. Yet then, when at last the new day had come, he found himself almost regretful—dreading the things he knew that it must bring; fighting down an

ever-growing tension.

Because he knew in his heart that he wasn't going to take it. Not with Eileen's life perhaps at stake; not with Hyperion's ice-shell beckoning.

Somewhere, somehow, he'd find a way . . .

There was a final routine with the medmen. They pronounced him sound, turned him over to the guards.

Then the ship slowed, hovered. Gravving down through the great Thelema airlocks, it settled to the ramp.

Flanked by two guards, Boone strode from the lift-shaft.

Schilling stood outside. Coolly, he extended documents to Boone's captors. "A temporary order for release of your prisoner to my custody for pre-hearing consultation, gentlemen."

The guard in charge checked through the papers, then stepped back. "He's all yours, Mister."

Schilling led the way to a surface carrier without speaking.

Boone eyed him curiously. "How does it look?"

The lawyer leaned back, and the carrier slid smoothly into motion. "Frankly, I don't like it. Krobis wants blood. He's come in all the way from Ganymede himself, instead of sending a deposition or testifying on the com-box; and

he's persuaded the Cartel to try you before a general board so that you can be discharged from the service, with release to the Federation for criminal action if you're convicted."

"So it's double trouble." Boone smiled wryly. "I might have expected that from Krobis."

"You're not convicted yet," retorted Schilling. "Besides, I got that release order so you'd have a chance to talk with someone who's in a spot to help you."

"Terral?"

The lawyer nodded and brought the carrier to a halt beside a building. "You'll find him in my office, there. I'll drop back later."

It was Boone's turn to nod. He got out and went into the building.

And there was Terral — lean, grey, shrewd-eyed Terral, the man empowered to speak for Associated Independents.

He gripped Boone's hand. "Glad to see you, man—even though the circumstances could be better."

"Oh, I don't know." Boone held face and voice alike noncommittal. "Anyhow, thanks for getting Schilling."

"You're wondering why, of course." Terral's lips drew thin. "Believe me, it wasn't altruism, Boone; not one bit of it."

Boone frowned. "Maybe I just don't understand."

"You will," the other clipped. And then: "Boone, how much do you know about Titan fever?"

"Titan fever—?" Boone shook his head. "Not too much."

"Are you aware that it's reached the epidemic stage on half-a-dozen satellites and planets?"

"What—!"

"The Federation's keeping the statistics under cover; otherwise there'd be a panic." Terral paced the floor like a caged lion. "The catch is, Boone, we're all like you: No one knows too much about the whys and wherefores of it, except that the original cases came among IC men who worked in the Helgae cities on Titan back when mekronal was first developed."

BOONE ran his thumb along his chin. "I'd heard that part. But I thought we had it licked with chandak extract."

"Chandak extract!" The independents' agent spun around, grey eyes blazing. "That's just the trouble! Chandak's a byproduct of mekronal—and all mekronal comes from Titan! So with IC assigned monopoly rights there, the rest of us are stuck."

"But the Federation—"

"The Federation's run by blithering idiots and IC stooges! Sure, with this epidemic they've set up a quota system. But how much does

that mean, when Cartel inspectors make out the production reports?"

"So—?"

"So IC's using chandak the same way they've used mekronal—as a weapon against the Independents!" Terral hammered his palm with a bony fist. "Just look at the pattern! With mekronal, their crews can work in all atmospheres, set up bases at a hundredth the cost of anyone else, and claim satellite monopoly rights from the Federation on grounds of prior colonization."

Boone nodded slowly. "Yes. I know how that works."

"All right. That's straight commercial rivalry, so even though it cuts our throats we've got no comeback. But now comes Titan fever—a disease that kills men like flies when you treat it with any of the mill run of specifics. If you don't treat them —" Terral broke off; looked square at Boone. "Boone, do you know the story on that?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"Then read this—a report from the top labs of your own damned organization! Don't ask me how I got it."

The Independents' rep was fumbling in a briefcase as he spoke. He drew out a thick blue-covered folder and handed it to Boone.

Boone stared down at it. "*Titan*

*Fever: An investigation of Untreated Cases,*" the title read. The binder was stamped "MOST SECRET" in big block letters, and it bore the official seal of Interplanetary Cartels' central research unit.

But the thing that held his eye was the signature on the submission.

The signature of Martin Krobis.

Frowning, he riffled through the document to the final page:

" . . . In summary, then, the following tentative conclusions may be reported:

"1. Although occasional deaths due to complications sometimes result from Titan fever, most untreated cases may be expected to recover.

"2. However, there is definite evidence that such cases undergo an extreme mutation of the gametes.

"3. While no adverse physiological effects of this mutation are apparent in infants born to parents one or both of whom have been infected, significant mental changes and/or deterioration stand out clearly.

"4. No such mutative effect is evident in cases treated with chandak extract or their offspring.

"On the basis of available data, therefore, it is considered urgent that all cases of Titan fever developing among Interplanetary Car-

tels personnel or their families be given prompt treatment with chandak extract.

"All base administrative chiefs are explicitly made responsible for seeing that such treatment is carried out as directed."

Stiff-fingered, Boone closed the folder. Again, his eyes met Terral's.

The lean man's face had grown bleak as Mars' windswept deserts. "Do you know what it's going to mean when that report gets out?"

"I can imagine."

"Can you? I wonder." The other raised a clenched fist; shook it. "Boone, it means a Cartel-dominated solar system, the end of human freedom! IC's got a monopoly on chandak and they intend to hold it, Federation or no Federation. The rest of us won't have any choice but to come to them on their terms, or else gamble that our children will grow up gibbering idiots."

In spite of himself, Boone shuddered.

• Terral kept on talking: "The production records tell the story. They say that chandak's in short supply—so short that it comes in dribbles. But that report you read doesn't mention any shortage, does it? All it gives is an order—a flat directive to see that all IC's



people are protected."

**WEARILY**, Boone nodded. "All right. You've sold me. Now tell me just how I fit in. What am I supposed to do?"

"Good!" The other slapped Boone's shoulder. "As to what you do, it's the same proposition that we talked about at Gandor City. The thing we're buying is your training. There's an Independent ship ramped in the main port, ready to grav off. It's equipped for mekronal production. You take it out and find some Helgae."

Boone's heart leaped. "You mean—I break and run? I don't stand trial?"

"That's why we had Schilling get that release order."

The room seemed suddenly distorted. Boone paced the floor to hide his shaking.

He'd left Eileen on far Hyperion, a prisoner of the Helgae.

No, in spite of all Krobis' machinations, fate had thrown him a wild gambler's chance to reach her.

Terral's voice drummed at him: "That order cost us, Boone. Who cares, though, if it breaks the Cartel? Sure, you'll be a fugitive for awhile. But you'll be safe so long as nobody thinks to tie you in with us, and we can smooth the whole business over once we get our own source of mekronal and

chandak . . ."

Pushing his jumbled thoughts aside, Boone pivoted. "What are we waiting for? Let's get started."

"Already?" Terral chuckled dryly. "Slow down! This is going to take a little doing." He bent over the desk, scribbled swiftly on a note-pad, and then straightened. "Take this to the manager at Tri-angle Freight. Hot as you are, we're going to have to crate you up and send you out onto the ramp as cargo."

"Right." Boone slipped the scrawl into his pocket. "I'll be on my way, then."

"Good luck!"

Boone answered with a wordless salute and, turning, strode from the office and the building.

He still felt a little dazed. How could it all have worked out so perfectly and so simply?

Only then, suddenly, a man appeared out of a doorway, hurrying in Boone's direction with head down—almost running.

Too late, Boone tried to sidestep. The man crashed into him and they both reeled, clinging to each other for support.

The next instant, hands gripped Boone from behind. A hard, unseen something rammed against his backbone. "Don't move, Boone!" clipped a tight, familiar voice.

Boone stiffened. "Krobis—!"

"Correct." The thing against Boone's back withdrew. Krobis stepped round into view, nerve-gun in hand, leaving his aides to hold the prisoner. His black eyes glittered. "For the record, you're under Cartel arrest again, in accordance with IC regulations."

Boone held his voice flat. "I can't stop you, Krobis. But when trial-time comes, the Federation may not think much of this."

"You think not?" The Ganymedan base director smirked, and took a stand with too-short legs wide-spraddled. "Personally, I'm more inclined to believe they'll cite me for a commendation — once they've heard my recording of your little talk with Terral!"

For the fraction of a second, Boone stopped breathing. His lips were all at once so stiff he couldn't speak.

"That hit you, eh?" sneered Krobis. "You should have been more careful. All I was interested in to start was finding out who pressured through that release order for you. I didn't guess you had ties to the Independents, or that you planned to run out. But I'm glad you tried it. The recording makes your conviction certain, and puts us where we can jump the gun on Terral.

"Meanwhile, you stay where you

belong—in IC's own Thelema guardhouse!"

## CHAPTER V

BOONE waited till the guard had left the cell-block to let in the group scheduled to conduct the preliminary inquiry. Then, with one last look out across the darkening ramp to where the Independent sphere-ship lay interned, he climbed onto the bunk, looped the end of the torn cloth noose up through the ventilator grating, twisted his collar still more awry, and stepped off into space.

The noose cut his neck, but not too badly. Most of his weight hung from the extra loop he'd run under his arms and round his chest. Yet the turned-up collar made it look like he was truly hanging by his neck alone.

There was a drone of voices from the hallway. Words drifted to him as the speakers paused outside the locked door.

"It's all set up," came the clipped tones of Martin Krobis. "We'll push through the special session of the board tonight, with a quick decision in favor of disciplinary discharge from Cartel service. The Federation court can hear the criminal case next cycle. By the end of the week he'll be on his way to Venus barracks."

Someone laughed raucously. A third voice crowed, "Leave it to Krobis!"

Then the bolt was snicking back, the block door opening. Quickly, Boone twisted his head to an appropriate angle. Closing his eyes, he let himself swing limp and motionless as he could.

The fraction of a second later one of the visitors choked, "Krobis! Look—"

"Damn him—!" This in tight fury from Krobis. "He can't cheat me this way! I won't let him!" Shoes slithered on the flooring. Quick! Help me!"

Hands lifted Boone. A knife hacked at the cloth noose.

The fabric ripped through at last. Still limp of limb, head lolling, Boone let himself be lowered to the bunk.

Then Krobis' voice rang close beside him: "This noose—! There's something funny—"

Stubby fingers tugged apart the double loops.

Boone slumped sidewise, away from Krobis, so that the other was strained far forward and off balance.

Then, in one swift, convulsive movement, he drove his elbow deep into his enemy's unprotected midriff.

The wind went out of the base director's lungs in a gust. He bent

double . . . hung tottering, face shock-contorted.

Twisting, Boone whipped his hand up . . . chopped down with all his might on the back of Krobis' neck.

Krobis slammed forward on his face on the floor.

As he landed, the spell of startlement that had held the others broke. With an incoherent roar, the man at the left lunged forward.

Boone jerked back. Writhing, flat on the bunk, he jackknifed his legs up and lashed out with both feet, straight at his attacker's face.

The man tried to dodge. Barely, in time, his head flicked aside.

But it was too late for him to twist his shoulders.

There was the brittle *Crack!* of a collar-bone snapping. The man catapulted back, clear across the cell-block.

But now the third man was upon Boone, swinging a nerve-gun. The guard crowded close behind him.

Before Boone could move, the barrel gashed open his forehead. A fist hammered at his temple. The guard clawed at him . . . crushed his flailing legs in a mighty bear-hug.

Spasmodically, Boone clutched the nerve-gun; jammed it upward.

A grunt of pain echoed as trigger-guard wrenched forefinger.

The man who held the weapon reared back sharply and let go of it.

Boone backhanded the butt, striking for the man's Adam's-apple.

The blow hit home. Choking, Boone's assailant tried to break free, tripped, and pitched backwards to the floor.

Boone spun the gun, reversed it, blazed a charge at the guard, dangerously close to his own legs.

The burly jailer gave a single paroxysmic jerk, then crumpled.

Blood from the barrel-gash spilling into his eyes, Boone lurched up and lunged for the open doorway.

Someone clutched at his ankle. Kicking free, not even turning, he charged on into the corridor and broke for the building exit—half-running, half-staggering.

Then the last door was swinging shut behind him. He plunged into the shadows along a warehouse.

Behind him, chaos and rising voices. A com-box blared, "All guards alert! Escape! This prisoner's dangerous! Don't let him get off the ramp! All guards alert! . . ."

Forspark lights flared at the gates. Somewhere a surface carrier rumbled into clattering motion.

**B**OONE sagged back against the warehouse and swabbed the

blood from his eyes. Then, still breathing hard, running almost doubled, he raced not towards the gates, but away from them, towards the black block that was the airlock power station.

Shadows again, and another pause for breath. Sirens blasting. The rumble of more carriers.

In spite of his tension, Boone smiled thinly. Swinging round, he moved warily on towards the station entrance.

The two men on duty stood in the doorway, peering out across the ramp.

Back flat to the wall, Boone silently edged towards them . . . closer . . . closer . . .

One said, "What's that—?" and started to turn.

Boone leaped forward, triggering a beam from the nerve-gun.

The two duty men went down as one. Dragging them inside, Boone kicked the door shut, then turned to the lock control equipment. In seconds, he had levered out the gear that prevented the outer locks from opening till the inner were closed and sealed.

Crossing to the emergency control bank, then, he threw the first switch.

Heavy-duty motors spun to droning life. A red light flashed on the board.

Ten seconds later the red light

clicked off. A green light blazed in its stead, and the motors cut off.

The inner locks were open!

Dry-lipped, Boone threw the second switch.

Motors. Red light. Green light. Silence.

Or almost silence. For now a whistling sound came dimly, apparent even within the building.

The sound of the ramp-bubble's precious atmosphere escaping!

Swinging up a heavy beryllium wrench, Boone smashed the switches.

That made his gamble good for fifteen minutes' leeway . . . a quarter of an hour at least that the locks would stay jammed open.

Boone threw down the wrench. Then, pivoting, he strode to the door and jerked it open.

On all sides, in the distance, men were running, shouting. There was a low roar of atmosphere compressors, trying to compensate for the changing pressure. Now sirens blasted.

While he watched, a surface carrier skidded around a warehouse and hurtled towards the airlock power station.

Ice-nerved, Boone waited, weapon ready.

The carrier screamed to a stop beside the door. Men leaped down.

Boone stepped from the shadows, swung his nerve-gun. "Back,

damn you!"

The men froze, staring.

Vaulting aboard the vehicle, Boone jammed the gun against the back of the driver's neck. "We're going onto the ramp—out to that Independent ship!"

Wordless, the man pressed buttons, swung the steering lever. The carrier jerked forward.

More dragging seconds. The great sphere on the ramp looming ever larger.

Boone clipped, "Pull in beside the lift-shaft!"

The driver obeyed.

Stunning him with a beam-edge, Boone jumped down, gun concealed once more, as a uniformed Federation trooper stepped from the lift. He made his voice harsh, peremptory: "Who's in charge here?"

It brought the trooper up short. "Sergeant Martov, sir."

"The crew's aboard?"

"Yes, sir. Security ordered them interned on the ship so word wouldn't get out that we'd taken over."

"Then take me to the sergeant. Fast!"

"Yes, sir." The man spun about.

Boone waited till they were both inside the lift, then hit the other behind the ear with the nerve-gun's barrel.

The trooper went down, unconscious.

ROLLING him out of the shaft, onto the ramp, Boone shoved the lift control lever to the fifth stop, the crew quarters.

The lift ground upwards.

There was another trooper on duty on the fifth level exit. Boone paralyzed him with the nerve-gun, not even speaking, and ran on down the corridor to the wardroom.

Two Independent ensigns sat playing N'rlan with a navigator. One glanced up as Boone burst in; half-rose, mouth gaping. "My God! The mek-man!"

Boone's heart leaped. "Then—you know about me?"

"Of course!" This from the other ensign. "Terral had the whole ship readied to take off on two minutes' notice. Only then they grabbed you, and the damn' Cartel nailed us down here with a secret internment order from the Federation."

"But you still could make a run? Everything's aboard and ready?"

"Sure, if the locks would only open. There's just a sergeant and three troopers on duty."

Triumph surged through Boone—a wild, raw-nerved elation that left his sagging back against the door-frame, dizzy.

In a voice that didn't even remotely resemble his own, he said, "The locks are open."

The others took over, after that.

As from afar, Boone heard the terse commands, the bellowed orders.

Then lights were flashing, hatch-es slamming. There was the grav-off's momentary lurch and wallow; the swift rush up, the hiss of passage through the airlocks while the sphere rocked like a cork in the vortex of the bubble's escaping atmosphere.

By the time the medmen had sealed the gash in his forehead, the ship was hurtling out across the void on its appointed course, away from Mars, towards far Hyperion.

Hyperion, and Eileen Rey.

Though there was little enough time for Boone to think about her.

And perhaps that was best, also. For the memory of her was with him every moment, like a shadow, and when he paused even for a second dark fantasies rose and his belly knotted.

So he was glad when the Independents' wizened, thong-tough captain called him in for consultation in the chartroom.

The hurtling heavens flashed on the wall-screen, sharp-focussed by the microreel projector. The captain raised a long light-pointer. "This is our track. To save time, we'll cut short through The Belt and Jupiter's orbit. It's dangerous, but it may fool them."

A chill touched Boone. "You

think they'll follow?"

"After what you did—those crippled airlocks?" The captain's laugh was curt and mirthless. "They'll have the whole Federation fleet out hunting for us. The only chance we've got is to find cover."

"And even if we do, we'll still be outlawed?"

"That's right." The captain shrugged. "So far as I'm concerned, I might as well tear up my ticket."

"But if we get mekronal and chandak—"

"That's why I chanced it."

Boone's backbone prickled. He stared at the screen in aching silence.

Overhead, the com-box crackled: "Detector room reporting. We are getting blips off Ceres."

"The asteroid station," the captain muttered. He turned to Boone. "You may as well know: I doubt we'll make it. Because the Cartel ships will hunt us, right along with the Federation fleet. The Europa units, Ganymede, Callisto—they'll all be out. With that many ships, they can set up a screen and follow us on their detectors. Even though we sneak through, they'll still track us and close in as soon as we grav down."

Boone remained tensely silent.

Now the microreel image showed Saturn rising.

Saturn, mother planet of bleak Titan.

Somewhere in the shadow of those vast, shimmering rings Hyperion, too, moved in its orbit.

Hyperion: Another potential source of the precious mekronal and chandak. Another world of strange domed Helgae cities.

Only Hyperion was turning out to be a trap, not refuge. With Cartel and Federation ships alike spread out in a filter-screen across the void, there'd be no chance for this lone Independent ship to land or hide there.

Unless—

BOONE all at once was rigid. "Captain," he asked, "could you run to Uranus?"

"Uranus—!" The wizened officer swung, stared at him. "Are you crazy, man? Why would anyone in his right mind want to go there?"

"That's not the question. Could you make it?"

The other's eyes narrowed. "Yes. I suppose so."

"And could you think up a reason for it—some excuse that the Fedfleet might find convincing?"

"Maybe."

Boone drew in a breath. "Then start getting your story together." He strode to the screen, traced a course with his finger. "If you arc

it right, we'll pass through Hyperion's field of attraction. When that happens, you can shoot a handful of us down in carriers without even stopping. You'll take the ship on towards Uranus. The Federation, the Cartel, won't even know we've left you."

The captain rocked. "Boone, you *are* crazy!"

"No!" As if by magic, the chill had left Boone. He burned with sudden, feverish excitement. "The only trick will be to breach the ice-shell. For that, you can rig an unmanned carrier or two with warheads. They'll blast a hole. The rest of the party can go down through it."

"But why?" the captain spluttered. "Why Hyperion, of all places? I've come this far because my orders from Terral were to do exactly what you wanted. But this—this gibberish about an ice-shell—"

"—Isn't gibberish!" Boone finished for him fiercely. "You thought this was to be a prospecting expedition, Captain. But that's not so; not really. Because I've been down on Hyperion before—and underneath the surface ice is a warm world with at least one big Helgae city! All we have to do is set up a base, start processing mekronal, and claim the whole satellite for Associated Independents!"

The captain's eyes distended. "Boone, do you mean it?"

"Of course I mean it! I was aboard a sphere that crashed after monsters hit it. That's why we've got to work fast. Martin Krobis knows about it. Unless we hurry, the Cartel may beat us to it with a unit."

But the captain was no longer listening. Face flushed, brow furrowed, he was studying the micro-reel-projected wall-chart. "I can pass the word to headquarters to send out a sphere-load of equipment. And I've got enough mekronal aboard to give maybe half-a-dozen men protection without a bubble; Terral bribed some Cartel hand to steal a little for him . . ."

He swung to the com-box, then; snapped orders.

The quiet of the chart-room dissolved into seething bedlam.

While Boone stood by, warheads were fitted to two carriers. With five mekronal-treated men, he crowded aboard a third.

Then, on the visiscreen, bleak Hyperion was looming. Boone waited, taut and strain-straight, hand on the carrier-release lever.

Now, slowly, the mountain peaks so far away began to form a pattern . . . a distortion and projection of the same pattern Boone had seen before, looking up at the crags that pierced the ice-shell.



For a moment he almost thought that in a prick of black he was seeing the rift made by the fallen Cartel sphere-ship.

Not that it mattered; enough that he had a mark to shoot at.

The captain's voice rasped from the com-box: "Boone! You'd better hurry. Our detectors show Federation ships approaching!"

THE last lingering fragments of Boone's hesitation vanished. He pressed the button set to trigger the first carrier.

Like a scarlet lance, the sleek craft shot from its cradle—speeding out from the sphere; hurtling down towards the ice-shell, faster and faster.

Boone pressed the second button.

Another explosive-laden carrier speared through the void upon its mission.

Boone turned in his seat. "Hatches—?"

"Secured and sealed," a brawny, blond-haired giant behind him grunted.

For the fraction of a second Boone stared at the rocky face, the grim-set jaw.

The others, too: four stone-featured crewmen, each waiting in silence despite the tension.

A tightness came to Boone's throat.

Only then, once again, the sphere-ship captain's voice was rasping: "Boone, those blips are coming closer!"

Tight-lipped, Boone pressed the third button . . . the button that triggered this final carrier.

He jarred back, then, as the pressure of the craft's swift acceleration hit him.

But it only lasted for a moment. Free of the sphere-ship, the carrier sped out into space along the path slashed by the two before it. Behind it, the hurtling mother-globe was already fading, as it raced on across Saturn's orbit towards Uranus.

Down, down the carriers lanced, straight for Hyperion's ice-masked surface . . . closer and closer, faster and faster.

Then, while Boone held his breath, the first struck.

A flash of fire; a vast exploding cataclysm. Ice spraying out like splattering water . . .

Before the cloud of icy splinters could even settle, the second carrier crashed home. New jets of spray leaped skyward. Great cracks appeared, from here a tracery of fine, shimmering lines against the satellite's frigid surface.

Boone slowed the third carrier till it hung almost motionless. Taut-nerved, he waited.

Slowly, the drifting blast-cloud

cleared. A pit yawned in the ice.

With wary patience, Boone dropped the carrier closer to the surface . . . hovered momentarily above the pit-edge.

Color flashed in the depths—the color of flower-fields, of verdure.

Of a sudden the jagged ice-claws didn't matter. Boone zoomed the carrier in a great loop, then dived it back again straight for the pit, the color.

Death's own tension rode with them. Once Boone thought he could hear the echo of a choked-off prayer.

Then the pit's ice-walls were closing around them. The target below seemed so very tiny . . .

The carrier struck ice, an out-thrust fragment. A shudder ran through its strain-racked structure. Veering, it crashed into the razor shards along the lower lip of the hole.

The impact flung Boone savagely against his belt. His head snapped back so hard that for a moment he thought his neck was broken. Behind him, through the scream of torn and tortured metal, a man shouted shrilly.

Then the carrier was falling. Barely in time, Boone caught the globe-control and spun it.

**E**ND for end, the carrier flipped over in the air. Swinging

like a pendulum by its nose, it settled to earth with a jarring shock that would have torn the ramping fins from a craft less sturdy.

Boone sagged in his seat. Then, rallying, he peered upward.

Ice still was falling. Apparently the force of the carrier's down-thrust—coupled with the earlier blasts—had shaled off great chunks of the ice-shell's under-surface.

As for the ship the others—Boone loosed his belt; scrambled round to see.

The blond giant already was bending over another crewman.

Boone stiffened. "Is it bad?"

The other straightened, shook his head. "I don't think so. He's just out cold; I think he hit his head on something."

"Good." Boone breathed again. "I think I'll chance an all-clear to the sphere-ship."

Turning to the visiscreen, he twisted dials, pressed buttons. Dimly at first, the mother-craft appeared, far out in space.

Only then, while he watched, another sphere swept across the shining panel, followed by yet another and another.

Cartel ships.

There could be no escape from them. Not when they rallied in such numbers.

Even in that moment, the Inde-

pendent ship was slowly, swinging.

A numb sickness came to Boone. He'd counted on days alone here . . . days to lay waste the Helgae city till at last he found Eileen.

Now that margin was reduced to cycles. For once Krobis found that he—Boone—and three carriers were missing from the sphere-ship just after it left Hyperion's orbit, it would be mere hours before Cartel ships were landing.

After that, there'd be Venus Barracks, as well as the emptiness of failure.

If he could only find Eileen before it happened . . .

He flicked off the visiscreen's main switch.

Like the hideous magnification of an echo, a scream rang through the carrier.

Boone whirled.

As he did so, the blond giant's head appeared, framed in the power-converter hatchway. His eyes were white-rimmed, staring, his left arm limp and bloody.

"Monsters!" he shrieked. "Monsters—!"

Those were the last words that he ever spoke. For as he shouted, six great clawed hands stretched through the hatch behind him and convulsed around his body.

The two top ones tore his head off . . .

## CHAPTER VI

BOONE died a thousand times in that one moment. Then, shouting a warning to the four remaining crewmen, he caught up an axe from the rack of emergency equipment and crept towards converter-room and monster.

The thing had withdrawn now, dragging the dead man's body with it—for what awful purpose Boone could not even guess.

Yet the question that lay implicit in the thought made him pause just short of the door for the fraction of a second. It turned out to be a pause that saved his life.

For in that same instant a claw-hand snaked back through the hatchway. Filth-encrusted nails scraped along his arm, endeavoring to seize him.

Boone jerked back with a hoarse, involuntary oath. Wildly, he swung the axe.

The keen blade bit into the monster's extended arm. A muddy sludge of blood gushed forth. The claw-hand jerked back.

Yet the thing made no sound—not a single groan or snarl or murmur.

Boone hesitated, even more wary than before. He kicked a fallen spanner towards the doorway.

Like lightning, the monster lung-

ed from its hideout — and now Boone saw why it had made no outcry.

The thing had no head! It consisted of arms only—six hairy, humanoid arms radiating out from a central core that looked like an enormous mushroom button.

Careening, the creature changed course. The arms clawed out to clutch Boone.

Leaping wide, he slashed with the axe—a savage blow with all his strength behind it, straight for the central core, the button.

There was a sound like a watermelon bursting. The button broke and flew apart, not so much sliced as shattered. A sickening stench erupted through the cabin. The arms sagged, limp save for spasmodic twitchings.

Half-sick with the sight, the smell, Boone stumbled back.

But before he could even drop the axe, a new cry came.

It rose behind him, this time—from the cabin's other end, the hatchway to the landing ladder.

Boone spun, ran towards the ladder.

From the bottom of the narrow shaft, a white-faced crewman beckoned in a frenzy. "Out—! Get out!" He vanished through the exit port.

Boone dropped the axe and, sliding, plummeted down the lad-

der. In seconds he, too, was stumbling through the port.

The crewman who'd shouted crouched on the ground in the shadow of the ramping fins beside one of his fellows, the man who'd lain unconscious since they landed. "Look!" His whole arm shook as he pointed.

Boone veered, then froze.

If what had gone before were nightmare, surely this were utter madness! For from beyond the circling hills, a hand was stretching towards them—a hand vast beyond all human concept! Like living columns carved in flesh, the fingers reached out, nails glittering in the filtered sunlight of the ice-shell.

With a mighty effort, Boone forced himself to motion. Lunging back through the port, he tore a long-range blaster from its wall-clip, then leaped to the ground once more and raced away, off to one side where there was space clear of the ship for him to use the weapon.

His action seemed to break the paralysis of the crouching crewman. Jumping up, the fellow disappeared for a moment into the carrier, then rushed out again with a second blaster and darted after Boone.

The giant hand's shadow fell upon the ship. The circling fingers closed about it.

Boone stumbled to a halt. Twisting, he swung round the blaster . . . triggered a bolt at the clutching hand.

For the barest instant the hand stopped short. Then, in one savage, spasmodic motion, the great fingers clamped down on the carrier, clenching.

**T**HERE was a clash and crash of rending metal; a roar of compressor tanks exploding. Flame spurted out between the crushing fingers.

Wrist-muscles bulging, the hand whipped high into the air, then down again with earth-shaking force. The fingers opened . . . spilled out the crumpled mass of wreckage that had been the ship.

. . . Wreckage, and the pitiful, broken bodies of the two crewmen who had been trapped inside.

A hoarse cry burst from the throat of their comrade, the man who'd followed Boone. Whipping up his blaster, he blazed bolt after bolt into the hand.

As a human might slap at a mosquito, the hand smashed down and crushed him, then started towards Boone.

Shock-rocked, quaking, he dived into the closest flower clump's cover . . . rolled and writhed through the foliage, flat against the earth.

Overhead the hand paused,

searching.

Then, bare yards from him, suddenly, it fell.

But not in a blow. No. This was different. For it fell limp and sagging, as if the muscles all at once had lost their power.

Boone lay like a statue—frozen, waiting.

Nothing happened.

The tension in him grew moment by moment, till he could hold it down no longer. He surged to his feet, blaster at the ready.

But the hand did not move. Before his eyes, as he stood there, it was . . . melting . . . oozing away into the ground in stinking rivulets of slime.

Numbly, Boone moved along it; and now, incredibly, he could see its termination, just below the rim of the nearest hills.

For it was an arm without a body—an arm that trailed off into nothing, like a figure cast in wax.

Yet there too lay the carrier, crushed and crumpled . . . the broken bodies of the men.

This limp, dead arm had done that . . .

It was more than human mind could take. Boone slumped to the ground and cowered there, shaking.

Nor would the seizure pass. It was as if he suddenly were chilling. Cold crept through his veins in icy

tendrils to the very marrow of his bones.

Harder and harder he shook. Yet still no surcease came. His whole body was aching now and it dawned upon him, dimly, that no shock alone could leave him thus yet still alive.

Then, at long last, the chills and cold departed, driven out by a quick, fierce heat. His mouth grew dry. His tongue took on new thickness. Flowers, hills, wreckage—all seemed distorted. He burned as with a flaming fever . . .

Fever—?

He knew, then.

*Titan fever!*

What else could it be, here on Hyperion, but that strange pyrexia that mutated Man's gametes?

So there was no hope for him, no answer . . .

He never knew for sure what happened after that—how much was reality, how much fever-madness.

For delirium came, and in that state he wandered. The hills rolled down in lowering barriers of menace, and flowers talked to him, and he walked beside strange streams.

And then, sometimes, it seemed that Eileen stood beside him . . . that he could hear her rippling laughter echo, and taste her lips, and smell the fragrance of her hair.

But Eileen was still a prisoner of the Helgae, sealed in a sphere somewhere within their weird, domed cities.

That meant he had to find her.

So he wandered on, babbling of mekronal and chandak . . . precious chandak, the only remedy that could save him from his fate.

And Krobis was there, too, and Terral—all the others. Sometimes they mocked; sometimes they helped him.

Not that it mattered. For now, all at once, he could get away from his own body, floating cloud-like in space beneath three great green suns.

The monsters came, then.

THE first was in the image of the Helgae—lumpish, mottled, but with a yawning orifice that he knew somehow was meant to be a mouth. Twice it tried to swallow him as he floated, then faded away again when he rolled away beyond its reach.

The second took the appearance of his own father. Its face pressed close, all clipped mustache and burning eyes and shiny skin.

He shrank before it.

But the face kept following him, pressing closer, and the feeling grew within him that if the tight grey lips should ever open, he would surely die.

So he surged away in utter terror . . . fled through the green-tinged sky-sea around him.

But his muscles were all at once like water, his movements as inadequate and slow as only the responses in a dream can be.

Desperately, he tried to move faster . . . faster . . .

The face rushed in. He screamed aloud.

Then he was falling. Head over heels, he pitched down into depths at once black as night and shining white and shimmering with weird iridescence.

The third monster rose out of the mists beneath him.

It was a thing of horror beyond the telling, with a body Boone sensed more than he saw.

But from that body rose a long and sinuously slender eyestalk, surmounted with a huge human eye.

It was the eye that held Boone; for as he stared into it in mute, numb fascination, he knew that it would draw him ever closer till at last the slime-mass that was the body could swirl out and suck him in.

A black wave of despair engulfed him. Of a sudden his palms, his whole body, were drenched with sweat. The feeling that he was falling faded. Vaguely, he became aware of roughnesses beneath

him. A breeze washed over him and he chilled.

Slowly, painfully, he opened his eyes . . . stared up into the murk of night.

But it was a night that was already dying. Far off to one side, a dim glow marked the coming of the day.

Cords of tension fell away. Once again, at last, he lived in a world of reality, not nightmare.

He hugged it to him; drew in the chill security of it with gusty, lung-expanding breaths.

The grey glow in the distance spread. Weakly, he sat up to look about him—and stared instead into the pale malevolence of a great, baleful, swaying eye!

He froze, not daring to move or speak.

For the thing before him was the monster of his fever-madness—the eyestalked horror from the dream.

Yet he knew—*he knew!*—that he had left delirium's valley. This was reality! Without question, the fever had waned and gone.

Then what—?

He had no answer. Not here; not now. He could only wait, and hope, and perhaps pray.

But while he watched, not daring to so much as flick an eye or move a muscle, the thing before him began to eddy slowly closer.

New sweat rilled down Boone's spine. A knot of tension drew tight within his belly.

Sinuously, the monster's eyestalk swayed. The huge orb atop stared at Boone unblinking.

Stiff-fingered, too fear-straight to even look away, he slid his hands out in arcs along the ground.

But they touched no stick, no stone, no clod, no debris. He remained as he had been, a warrior sore beset, without a weapon.

And still the monster eddied closer . . .

He could not even break and run. Weak as he was, he dared not even trust his muscles.

Spasmodically, his nails scraped at the dirt.

The dirt—!

He dug his fingers deep into it . . . sucked a ragged breath to ease his hammering heart.

Like a serpent poisoning to strike, the monster paused. The horror that was its body drew together.

With a wild shout, Boone hurled the dirt square into the glaring eye.

THE eyestalk whipped back, quivering and pulsing. Then, in an instant, recovering, the creature spilled forward in a rush.

But already Boone was twisting, scrambling, clawing his way along the ground.

Then there was a rock beneath his hands, big as a man's head. In spite of his weakness he clutched it, swung it up.

The monster swept down upon him as he pivoted.

Boone hurled the rock.

It struck at the base of the weird thing's eyestalk. With a snapping sound, the orb's stem broke.

Twitching, writhing, the body halted. Then, as with the giant arm, the other monsters, the creature's whole structure began to shrivel and ooze away in slime.

Panting, shaking, Boone slumped back to the ground, his brain a cauldron bubbling with inchoate thoughts.

Like a mosaic, then, the pieces fell into place.

This whole void-area—and this area only—seemed to crawl with mad phantasms . . . lunatic life-forms like none that Man had ever seen before. Out of nowhere, they materialized aboard the Cartel's sphere-ships. Here, on Hyperion; Titan, too.

Those were the facts. Now, suddenly, they took on form and pattern.

For in his delirium, Boone knew he'd had nightmares of this specific slime-drenched horror.

Awakening, his fever gone, he'd faced the hideous thing on reality's



plane.

And the Helgae could play strange tricks with human minds

. . .

The Helgae—they were the correlating factor!

The Cartel had come and raped their silent cities for the sake of mekronal and chandak.

So lacking the power of discourse, words to protest, they'd struck back in their own dark way.

Somehow, they'd reached into men's deep subconscious and dredged up monsters—the paranoid delusions of fevered brains.

Then, as the mediums of another day had claimed to give spirits ectoplasmic body, so now the Helgae materialized nightmares into life!

What armor could turn aside such a weapon?

Yet beyond it lay the threat of Titan fever. For that, too, could be a blow struck by the Helgae—the main attack, designed to cripple the mass-mind of the whole, far-flung human race!

Boone shuddered.

Yet strength rose in him, not despair. For with knowledge, the fears he'd felt of the unknown vanished. He looked about in the growing light with new, fresh eyes.

The landscape had changed from that which he last remembered. This ground lay in altogether dif-

ferent contours.

Frowning, he turned.

Now, with a shock, he found himself staring out on a familiar scene: the arcs and domes and bubbles of the self-same sprawling Helgae city where he and Eileen had lain entombed.

. . . Where Eileen still might lie.

It was a thought to make his belly churn, his heart pound, wrenching cruelly at every atom of his being. He sagged, gripped his head between his hands.

THE sleeve of his shirt fell across his face, ripped wide. Incredulously, he discovered that everything he wore hung in rags and tatters. Even his shoes were slashed and mud-caked.

How far had he strayed in his fever-wanderings? How long had it been since delirium struck?

He ran his fingers over cheek and chin: a three days' growth of beard at least . . . maybe more.

Not that it mattered. For he was alive; and out of horror, hypothesis had been born. If, truly, the materializing monsters and Titan fever were weapons of the beleaguered Helgae, then a truce must somehow be arranged, even if it meant complete human withdrawal from all satellites of Saturn.

That called for action by the

Federation: action which the Cartel's chiefs would fight with tooth and nail.

Yet IC might well defeat itself by its own opposition. All apart from any Helgae menace, the Independents would rally instantly to whatever cause should threaten to disrupt the Cartel's mekronal production.

But that could wait; Eileen could not. Here, now, somehow, he had to save her.

Or was that hopeless?

Only time and fate could give the answers. Meanwhile, the least that he could do was try.

Unsteadily, Boone rose. He cursed the fever that had drained his strength.

It was then he heard the crashing blaster bolt beyond the ridge, off to his right, away from the Helgae city.

Again, his heart leaped. Blast-ers spoke for men, not Helgae—human help, here on Hyperion with him!

Lurching, stumbling, he dragged himself up the hill.

At last, the crest.

Below, the hull of a ramped Independent carrier, scarlet and silver, came into view.

Now strength surged through Boone. He broke into a staggering run, straight down the slope.

Only then, as he careened too fast past a brushy thicket, something thrust out between his flying feet. He spilled forward in a bruising, sliding fall.

A voice rasped, "Don't move! I've got you covered!"

Painfully, Boone twisted.

A man stood in the shadow of the thicket—a man with a blaster, a man who wore the blue-grey field outfit of an Interplanetary Cartels guard.

The other's lean face split in a mirthless grin as he stalked forward. "You're Boone, aren't you?" And then: "Krobis had you figured. He said you'd come in if you spotted an Independent ship."

"Krobis—?" Boone's lips went stiff. "You mean, he's here?"

"Of course he's here." The guard chuckled. "You told him about this Helgae city underneath the ice-shell yourself, didn't you? So he set up a base but pronto, with manpower enough to fight off monsters. He plans to start blasting the domes before next cycle, get a mekronal unit into production, and claim Hyperion for the next Cartel."

He broke off; gestured to Boone with the blaster. "Get up! We're going in. The way Krobis feels about you, catching you's good for Earth leave and a sergeant's rating."

NUMBLY, Boone heaved himself to his feet, stood swaying.

Was this to be the end of all his sufferings — back where he started, a prisoner en route to a cell in Venus Barracks? Was the Cartel to go on butchering the Helgae till opposing life-forms clashed in full-scale war?

Above all, was he never to know the truth as to Eileen's fate? Did this mark the end of his last dim chance to save her?

For all illusion had died in him. Whatever else might be, there was no mercy in Martin Krobis. Ego, vengeance, ambition — those were the man's three key dynamics. Nothing else mattered to him; not truth, nor justice, nor even the life of Eileen Rey. He'd laugh at theories . . . gloat over his triumphs . . . sacrifice the rest of the human race if need be for the sake of the Cartel and his own fame and power.

"Get moving," the guard clipped. "We're going in."

Wearily, Boone turned and stumbled down the slope through the brush towards the ramped carrier.

But for all despair, fatigue, a spark still burned within him.

Krobis must not win! He must not!

Ahead, the ground fell away more sharply; and there were trees

and bushes, saplings.

With cold deliberation, Boone tripped—pitched forward—let himself fall headlong.

But as he fell, he caught the limb of a slender treelet.

It bent almost double.

Prone now, Boone clung to it.

The guard ran to him, blaster ready. "Get up, you!" Face a mask of wary menace, he stepped closer.

Too close.

Boone let go of the limb.

The treelet snapped back. Branches slashed into the guard's face.

Out of reserves he had not known existed, Boone drew strength to hurl himself into spasmodic action. He twisted, kicked for the guard's legs with all his might.

The man went down with a hoarse, choked shout.

Boone lurched down upon him. His elbow smashed at the other's temple.

The guard sagged, glaze-eyed and groggy.

Snatching up the blaster, Boone hit his adversary with the butt, a savage blow.

The guard went limp, unconscious.

Sick, sobbing for breath, Boone slumped beside him.

But only for a moment.

Then, rallying, he fumbled the

rations from the other's belt-case, gulping down the concentrates in great, gagging, half-chewed bites.

His protesting stomach writhed. For long seconds he thought he was going to vomit.

But that, too, passed. The sugars, the ectoids, began to reach his bloodstream.

Strength came with them.

Tight-lipped, clutching the blaster, Boone began the long, weary climb back up the hill.

. . . Back, and beyond, to the strange, domed city of the Helgae . . . and to Eileen Rey . . .

## CHAPTER VII

HE saw the light-shafts first—two glowing cones of color that speared down from a single halo-source high in this vastest of all the bubble-chambers. The beam on the left shone rich with hues of deepest purple. The other, the one on the right, shimmered golden as Earth's September sun.

Numb, wordless, Boone moved forward with unsteady steps.

Now he saw the cones' bases as well as source; and all at once his heart was pounding, pounding, till he thought that it must surely burst.

For each light played on a separate transparent sphere that floated, somehow invisibly suspended,

at eye-level in the bubble-room.

A nude human body lay within each sphere.

Shaking, Boone made his way to the gold-bathed globe.

But the figure inside was that of a man, a stranger, with a calm, vaguely-familiar face.

Boone turned to the second sphere, that on which played the cone of purple light.

This time, he looked upon a woman.

*Eileen!*

He swayed, still not daring to allow himself to believe it.

How had he found her in this weird maze, this bubble-catacomb? How long had he wandered through dim-lit passageways and domed, echoing chambers? How many times had he despaired?

It was as if destiny had walked beside him, guiding.

Destiny, or . . . other minds. Alien minds, perhaps greater than his.

But whatever the answer, he'd kept on, and he'd found her. That was what counted.

Now, while he watched, new radiance suffused the chamber. The light-cones dimmed; and as they faded, the spheres floated slowly, gently, to the floor.

Then, as on that other, dream-like day that seemed so long ago, there was a crash of silent thun-

der. The globes split, fell apart.

Boone dropped to one knee. With trembling fingers he touched Eileen's bare breast.

Her flesh was warm, her heart-beat steady. Like a child awakening, her lashes fluttered. Then, lids already lifting, she turned and looked up at him with calm, untroubled eyes.

A sob rose in Boone's throat. He pressed her to him.

She laughed, ever so softly; and tenderness was in it. Cool fingers smoothed his brow, his hair. "Fred, you sound so—worried . . ."

His words came in a jumble, then: "You—you're all right? There's—nothing's happened?"

"No, of course not." She sounded not even quite certain of his meaning. "I only went to sleep for a little while; that's all."

The last tension drained from Boone's taut body. Weak, tremulous, unsteady, he slumped beside her amid the segments of the shattered sphere. "There's been so much, so many things—" He groped for words.

Only then, before he could say more, a distant impact rocked the chamber.

The impact of a demolition charge exploding.

In spite of emotional drain, exhaustion, Boone went rigid. "Kro-bis—!"

"What—?" Eileen's blue eyes distended. "Fred, you mean he's here?"

"Yes, with plans for blasting apart this whole cursed Helgae city!" Boone stumbled erect. "Quick! We've got to go!"

THE girl rose beside him, then looked down in sudden, swift abashment. A flush swept up her throat. Her face turned scarlet. "My clothes—! Where are they?"

A man's voice answered, "Here."

As one, Boone and Eileen spun around.

The stranger, he who had lain in the golden sphere, was getting up. Calmly, he strode to a low ledge on the far side of the bubble and picked up one of two bulky bundles; tossed it deftly to Eileen. "Everything is there."

Boone gripped his blaster. He moved a quick step forward. "You! Who are you?"

"They call me Lor."

"A name's no answer. Where'd you come from? How'd you get here?"

The other bent to pick up the second bundle, then straightened and, turning, stood full-face to Boone. "You . . . do not know? You cannot guess?"

Boone studied him . . . stared narrow-eyed at the calm, strange-familiar face.

A youthful face, yet with eyes somehow old beyond all years.

A prickling ran up and down Boone's spine. "You—look—like me!"

"Of course." Lor smiled, turned to Eileen. "Surely you can tell?"

Her hand rose to her throat. Her face grew pale. "I—I don't know. You're like Fred . . . or—or—my father—"

"Yes." The sphere-man nodded gravely. "Indeed, I am—can only be—like both of you."

The silence echoed, then.

But it was a silence too taut to last for long. It had to break.

"You—can only be—like us?" Boone forced out the words.

Again, the other nodded. "Yes." And then: "Because—I am your son!"

Somewhere too close, another demolition charge exploded. But for Boone, the room rocked more with the stranger's words than from the blast.

"No!" he choked. "No!" Beside him, Eileen had slumped dazed-faced to the floor.

The sphere-man sighed. "I know. They told me it would be hard for you to understand."

"They—?"

"The ones you call the Helgae." For the first time, emotion seemed to grip Lor. He stared down at

the bulky bundle in his hands; then, opening it, spread out an array of Cartel crewman's clothes. "They are an old race, older than you can know; and wise. They wanted no war with anyone, but there was no way for them to speak to a life-form so unlike theirs. So, when your ships attacked their cities on the world called Titan, they drew monsters from your minds to slow your onslaughts, then sought some way to bridge the barrier between your different brains."

Boone caught his breath. "You mean—mutation—?"

"It was the only answer." The man who claimed him father bent to slide on shoes. "By casting their powers of mind in human bodies through the contagion you call Titan fever, the source of conflict between your separate species once and for all could be removed."

"Of course!" Of a sudden Boone was pacing. "Only then, our sphere-ship hit Hyperion, broke the ice-shell—"

"—And menaced another whole Helgae world." Lor shrugged into a jacket. "It made the danger too great for them to wait on normal human reproduction and maturing."

"But you two were on that sphere-ship—and you were male and female, man and woman."

"Then—that's why they trap-

ped us!"

"Yes. While you lay in your sphere here, in the state you call unconscious, your seed was planted in the woman. When growth began, the egg itself was taken, processed. By science beyond your human dreams, they speeded the whole cycle of gestation, then brought me on to manhood in days instead of years. The mind-rays drained all knowledge from both of you, gave it to me, that I might be able properly to play my role."

Boone stopped short in his pacing. "Your role—?"

"You'd call it that." Now fully dressed, the other straightened. "I am a messenger, a human spokesman for the Helgae, with no other goal than to help our race live at peace."

"There'll be men who take convincing of that."

"You mean—men like the one named Martin Krobis?"

Boone stared. "Krobis—? You know about him?"

"Of course." His mutant son still smiled. "The mind-rays poured your every thought into me—even those too utterly alien for the Helgae themselves to understand. So, I know of Krobis: the things he's done; the way he thinks; the fact that he is here now, blasting at this very city—"

Like an exclamation point, new

impact came. Thread-like cracks shot through the radiance of the bubble-chamber's inner surface. The floor shook till Boone could hardly stand.

LOR'S face went grim. His voice rang with sudden tension: "Come, quickly! We dare not die in this mad destruction! We dare not!"

He pivoted as he spoke; moved swiftly towards the bubble's exit.

Gripping his blaster, Eileen trembling beside him, Boone followed.

Now they walked another world—a world of weird translucence, bubble-cells and tunnels, pitch-blackness and colors too brilliant for human eyes to bear.

Yet through it all, the man called Lor strode swiftly, surely. Not once did he hesitate or falter. It was as if the whole, vast, maze-like pattern were etched in acid on his brain.

Then, at long last, they were on a ramp and climbing in slow spirals, ever upward. Ahead, a pale light glowed . . . the light of Hyperion's ice-shell-filtered outer day.

Lor led them out a low-roofed cave-mouth . . . helped them up the slope of a brushy rise. Bitterly, he flung his arm out: "Look—the city!"

Boone looked, then shuddered; and suddenly Eileen was sobbing.

For they gazed on a holocaust, a ruin, strewn with the smouldering shards of a thousand shattered domes.

"So these are the ways of men!" Now there was wonder in Lor's voice; and sadness. "They have so much to learn!"

"Oh, Lor—!" Eileen choked on her tears.

The mutant turned to face her. "You need not cry, my mother. We—I—shall teach them better." Then, once more smiling: "Think of some living thing—a thing of beauty. Picture it sharp and clear within your mind."

She stared up at him—face puzzled, eyes still brimming. "I—I'll try . . ."

"Then close your eyes."

She did as he had ordered.

Lor stood unmoving, placid. Yet while Boone watched, mists seemed to rise and gather, swirling. Then, in their midst, a flower took form, a perfect blood-red rose.

The sphere-man reached out, plucked it. "Here, my mother."

Eileen's eyes went wide with awe and sheer delight. She gasped aloud and held the opening bud close, drinking in its fragrance.

Lor faced Boone. "You asked for proof to convince doubters. Would such serve?"

Boone ran his tongue along dry lips. "Do I even need to answer?"

"Then let us go. We must reach those who can stop the blasting of these Helgae cities."

"That means the top men of the Federation. No one else could act against the Cartel."

"So, we must have a carrier." Lor smiled thinly. "Even one of Krobis', perhaps . . ."

Boone's blood quickened. "Yes. It might be. His base camp's near."

"Then—why are we waiting?"

Wordless again, they left the rise; and now there was new, silent tension in them—tension born of looming dangers yet to come . . . of the very world-shaking import of their task.

Yet other factors, even more, churned Boone to turmoil.

Could he believe the man called Lor—the incredible tale he'd told, the things he'd said?

Or, even assuming belief, could he yet trust the other? What proof did he have of the real effects of the mutation, or of the Helgae's motives? True, they'd not harmed either him or Eileen. But might not that be a mere trick to lull suspicion? Perhaps Lor himself did not even know the facts. It could be that he was only a pawn—a being created as part of some dark plan to bring the whole human race down in disaster.

As for Eileen— Boone frowned and pondered. She was changed,



somehow, from the girl he'd known. It was as if her basic drive, her fierce ambition, all at once had vanished. Now she was woman. Woman only.

Questions, questions. Seething, they loomed ever-larger, till at last they were more than his aching brain could cope with. Of a sudden it came to him that sometime, somewhere, there must be an end to thinking, indecision.

For him, that moment had already come. From here on, if he were not to find himself forever immobilized by doubt, there could be no choice for him but action.

So, he would act.

**T**HEY topped another rise as Boone reached his decision . . . looked out across a flower-field into the valley where the familiar scarlet outlines of the ramped Independent carrier rose.

It would be only simple justice were they to steal that captured craft back from Krobis.

Boldly, Boone strode forward. It was as if, suddenly, all fear had left him.

Or perhaps he knew instinctively, somehow, that here audacity might win where stealth had failed.

The flower-field fell behind them. They moved down a brushy draw into the valley. On, to the outskirts of the base camp.

And still no guards rose up to halt them. A strange, deserted air hung about the place. There was no sign of life, no human movement.

On, through the camp grounds. Across to the carrier. Around the great ramping-fins to the yawning hatchway.

Still naught but silence. An echoing silence, too complete believe.

Eileen pressed against Boone. "Fred, I'm afraid!"

Only it was too late for fears now; too late for panic. He climbed through the port, not even answering.

Lor crowded behind him. "Let me go, my father—"

"You'll follow." Boone clipped it. "You've got a job; me — I don't matter."

On, up the ladder; then through other hatches.

Still silence. Still no sign of crewmen.

At last, the control room. Boone's heart pounding, pounding.

He stepped through the entrance. But this cell, too, lay empty.

Slick-palmed, taut nerves quaking, Boone waved on the others.

They came in. Their breathing rasped loud in the stillness. Boone tightened his grip on the blaster.

Lor moved to the rear, to the converter chamber. "Perhaps here

—” He pushed open the hatch-door.

The silence broke, then.

A thousand ways it broke: in the *Whish!* of a club, and the thud of a heavy blow landing; the quick scrape of feet, the blurred whir of fast movement. A curse and a clanking, a raw ring of metal.

Lor went down as a rock falls, blood spurting from a head-wound.

Eileen screamed.

And then, there was Krobis: tight-lipped, sharp-featured Krobis of the too-short legs and too-slicked black hair.

Guards crowding past him, he stood in the converter-room hatchway, and never had Boone seen such malice on any human face.

“So, you traitor!” Now Krobis was laughing. “I swore that I’d get you, and by Rega, I have!”

Boone stood wordless, gripped by sick numbness.

“Chelan, take that blaster!”

A guard shuffled forward.

“No!” Boone grated. His finger went tight on the trigger. He backed to the wall-plates.

“So—?” Krobis leered at him. “Think of the girl, Boone—your precious Eileen! What chance would she have, if you let go a blast-bolt?”

Eileen—! Boone turned to stare at her.

She stood slumped, face covered.

Her shoulders were shaking. Wearily, Boone let the guard take the blaster.

“Good!” Krobis stalked forward, still leering. “But not for you, Boone! This time you don’t get off with just Venus Barracks!”

Boone raised his head slowly. “Not Venus Barracks—?”

“No, damn you!” Krobis’ voice rang with elation. “I’m in command here—and this is an unchartered base! Under space law, that gives me full power to try and pass sentence.” A pause, electric with tension. “I’m condemning you to death!”

**I**T was the strangest of moments. For all at once Boone’s heart was no longer pounding. The tension drained from him. It was as if he had known from the start what was coming. The words in themselves brought only relief, not more panic.

Krobis wouldn’t even be censured. He stood too high in the Cartel for that. Federation officials could be counted on to go along, too, if for no other reason than the trouble at the Thelema base, the wrecking of the airlocks.

Now Krobis was turning. He spoke to a sergeant: “Get a squad ready. They die in five minutes.”

“‘They’—?” Boone went rigid. “What do you mean, ‘they’? I’m

the one who's condemned, not Eileen and Lor!"

"Is that so?" Krobis' sharp-featured face was like granite. "You were in this together."

Fury rocked Boone. "You're afraid, Krobis; that's the answer—afraid that this whole dirty business will backfire—"

"Is that quite all?" Krobis' eyes, his voice, had never been colder. "If so"—this to the guard—"sergeant, you may proceed with the execution!"

Sweat chilled Boone. "Wait . . ." In spite of himself, all at once he was pleading. "Kill us both, then—Eileen and me. But not Lor, there. He's a mutant—"

"A mutant—?"

"Yes. The Helgae, those structures we process—they're living, not dead. They sent him to tell us, to give us their knowledge—"

"Their knowledge? What knowledge?" Of a sudden Krobis' black eyes were gleaming and wary.

Boone sucked in a breath. "How much would the Cartel give to learn mekronal's structure—the true chemistry of it?"

"Mekronal—? This creature can make it? From basic elements found outside Saturn's system?"

"Yes."

"Then he *must* die!"

Boone rocked under the onslaught. He groped for words;

found none.

The other kept on talking: "There are things you should know, Boone—and these guards here are men I can trust, so I'll tell you." Martin Krobis smiled thinly. "You always forget that I stand for the Cartel. We're reaching for power, those of us high in it. Mekronal is our weapon. So long as it's ours alone, that power keeps growing. Make it free to all comers, and IC's backbone is broken."

"You mean that you'd wipe out a whole culture to hold it? You'd bring war with the Helgae for the sake of the Cartel?"

"Are you stupid enough that you have to ask me?" Krobis' words dripped contempt. "We'd do even more, you fool—as witness our gambit with chandak?"

"Your gambit—?" Boone rocked again.

"So I term it." Now the other was chuckling. "Consider that report Terral showed you, for instance. I meant him to have it."

"Then—chandak—"

"—Is a fraud, pure and simple. It has no effect at all on mutation. For that matter"—once more, Krobis chuckled—"our tests show that the mutation itself brings new mental powers, not loss of old ones. But a contrary report could bring panic, help to break our opponents. So . . ." He shrugged.

It was a world out of nightmare, a moment to madden.

"Damn you, Krobis!" Boone choked. "Damn you!"

He flung himself forward, then, heedless of weakness, and the guards, and the weapons.

If only his hands could reach Krobis' throat, rend it—!

But a clubbed blaster hit him. He sprawled to the floorplates. Krobis' laugh rang out above him, harsh and vindictive. Death's chill fingers touched him.

Only then, in the shadows where Lor lay, his eyes caught strange movement—a slithering, a rustling, a swirling of vapors.

Numbly, he wondered . . .

But guards seized his arms and dragged him up roughly. Martin Krobis spat, "Kill him!" and bloodied his cheekbone.

The guards jerked him backwards, stumbling and reeling.

As they did so, the movement surged out of the shadows—and now it was more than mere vapor.

**A** MONSTER, it rose up — a weird, insectile monster! Great mandibles speared out, clacking and slashing.

A guard saw it, cried hoarsely and leaped back.

Too late. The thing was upon him. Claws ripped at his belly. A stinger-shaft pierced him.

Someone fired with a nerve-gun.

He died the monster's second victim.

Panic roared through the room, then. The guards trampled each other in their rush for the hatchway. Boone swayed off balance, deserted.

Only five in the room now: Lor, Eileen, Krobis, Boone — and the monster.

The thing swung towards Krobis.

But Krobis spun aside, not even attempting to flee; he snatched up the fallen guard's nerve-gun.

Then, pivoting, ignoring the monster, he aimed the gun straight at Lor's prone figure.

Eyes open now, the mutant jerked back—trapped, cornered.

Boone and Eileen lunged as one.

The girl was closest. Her hand hit the nerve-gun as Krobis pulled the trigger.

The charge burned out against the wall-plates off to one side of Lor.

Before Krobis could fire again, Boone was upon him. They went down together, rolling and wrestling and panting. Boone could feel his strength begin to go.

But now it was not for himself that he was fighting. The fate of two races hung on the outcome.

With a curse, he writhed sudden-

ly upward, then threw himself back, smashing Krobis' head down to the floor.

The other's muscles went slack. Sobbing, Boone kicked clear.

Then something whipped past him—the monster, all claws slashing.

Its stinger speared through Martin Krobis' brain.

There was darkness after that, for Boone: a shadowy darkness that somehow was more of his mind than in the room. Dimly, he knew that the carrier all at once was hurtling upward; that the monster had vanished back into whatever realm from whence it came.

Not that it mattered at this moment. Who cared for monsters? The thing was Lor's creation, surely—a Helgae weapon he'd materi-

alized to save them, just as for his mother's — Eileen's — pleasure he had made a rose.

Lor, their son, the mutant. Lor, first clear-eyed champion of a new and higher race.

How many battles would they fight together? What perils would they face before the war against the Cartel's greed was won?

And then, Eileen . . .

As if in answer to his thought, she came now; knelt beside him, cradling his weary head close to her breast.

"Eileen," he whispered, "Eileen, we have a mission . . ."

She answered softly, "My mission is with you, Fred, now and always."

He liked that thought, Fred Boone decided. It was one on which a man could rest at peace.

*The End*

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# John's Other Practice

*By*

*Winston Marks*

**Slot machines usually give you a big pain in the wallet. But Cunningham's Symptometer was more considerate — it also diagnosed the pain . . .**

I KNEW that John Cunningham had been warned on graduation day that no man with a romantic nature should specialize in gynecology. John was not only a romanticist; he was also the best looking intern north of the equator.

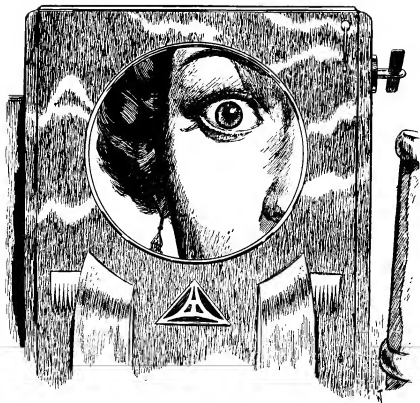
The laws of probability functioned. Within three years, John Cunningham was married, divorced, disgraced and flat broke. And so it was that the winsome, six-foot, blonde-headed nurse's idol of the flashing smile and brilliant mind, approached life with three strangely related goals, namely: (1) To practice medicine successfully without (2) coming in contact with his patients, and yet (3) make back the family fortune he had squandered mixing potions with poetry.

In a much less interesting way, I, too, was diverted from an otherwise promising career in the practice of

conventional 21st Century medicine. My final exam before the board revealed an aptitude that landed me a fat offer from the International Medical Association. The job was Special Investigator on the Malpractice Board of Control. My apparent immunity to emotional disturbances from the other sex, ironically, was the deciding factor of my appointment.

My first intimation of John Cunningham's vicarious practice came in the form of an order to check on a complaint from the Hotel Celt in New York. I bussed over to the 48-story hostelry and questioned the manager, a fat, bald man of some forty-two years and no arches.

"A lady doctor," he mourned, "has served warning she will sue unless I take out the slot machines from our mezzanine powder rooms."



"I know," I said. "She filed the complaint that brought me here. What I want to know is what does a slot machine violate by being in the ladies' room?" I meant, what violation beyond the usual federal, state and county restrictions whose ineffectual enforcement rendered them anachronisms in this age of device-gambling.

"Why does this remotely con-

cern the medical profession?"

Mr. Dennithy, the manager plucked an imperfect petal from his buttonhole carnation and reluctantly pointed out, "These machines are vending, not gambling devices. They issue medical advice — on a limited scale," he added hurriedly.

"What!" I yelled in his face. "Let's go see this."

The tastefully decorated lounge was jammed with females, many of whom were bunched in little chirping be vies along the west wall. Stubby queues of women gave the place the look of a pari-mutuel stand, but the cheerful, tinkly chatter had nothing of the grim spirit of betting.

The three women attendants threw up their hands in despair when I told them to clear the room. "We can hardly get them to leave at night so we can clean up the place," one complained.

Impatiently I barged in, flashed my gold and platinum serpent-and-staff badge, and shouted. "These machines are illegal. This is a raid! Stand where you are, every last one of you!"

**T**HAT did it. I almost got trampled in the stampede of high heels. Score one for my specialty in applied psychology and semantics. I learned later that, compared to one John Cunningham, I was a babe in the maternity ward.

Of this I got my first inkling when I examined one of the ten machines along the wall. It had a slot for a quarter. It was only two feet across by seven feet high and one foot thick. A circular mirror at eye level drew the female attention, and alongside was the slogan in large orange print:

*"DO YOU REALLY FEEL WELL? Have you pains in your abdomen? Answer correctly the following questions and learn the truth from the Appendicitis Symptomometer."*

The next machine was named a "Kidney Stone Symptomometer." The next advised about allergies, the next, pulmonary tuberculosis, and so on down to the one on the far end. Before this somewhat larger machine was the densest litter of carmine-tipped cigarette butts, some still smoldering on the carpet. This evident number-one favorite on the Symptomometer Hit Parade asked disturbingly:

**"COULD IT BE YOU ARE PREGNANT?"**

Each machine had a bank of detailed questions to answer, each so couched that it could be satisfied by pressing one of three buttons. The instruction read: "Push the Red Button to answer YES, the White Button for NO, and the Yellow Button for SORT OF." This machine required a dollar.

To say that I was intrigued would only be searching for words. Having no change I demanded a silver dollar from Dennithy. He shifted from one foot to the other, and never before have I seen a genuine hotel man blush.

"Really, Mr. Klinghammer——"

"Doctor Klinghammer," I re-



mind him.

"Oh, yes. But—actually, I hadn't realized the exact nature of these devices. The, er, diseases which they purport to diagnose, I mean. My engineer, Mr. Shiftin merely said—"

"We do not prosecute innocent-ly victimized business-men," I told him. "Now, that dollar, please."

"But wouldn't one of the quarter machines—" he trailed off under my best scowl and produced a silver disc from his fawn-colored vest.

I sent him out for more coins and set about inserting negative symptomatic answers. Upon examination the questions appeared to be remarkably phrased. Several of them seemed unrelated to the condition of pregnancy, but it turned out that Cunningham knew what he was doing.

When the last button was depressed a soft, melodic chime disguised the click of the mechanism which ejected the cardboard tab. It read:

"IF YOU HAVE ANSWERED THESE QUESTIONS HONESTLY THE SYMPTOMETER OBSERVES THAT IT IS EXTREMELY UNLIKELY THAT YOU ARE PREGNANT. YOU ARE URGED TO CONSULT A COMPETENT OBSTETRICIAN. VERIFY THIS OPINION."

Next, I set into the machine the proper answers to describe an ambiguous condition with contradictory symptoms. Dennithy came back with more change, and this time the tab read:

"THERE IS A POSSIBILITY OF PREGNANCY INDICATED A COMPETENT PHYSICIAN CAN DETERMINE AT ONCE. THERE IS ALSO AN INDICATION THAT YOUR ANSWERS MIGHT BE EITHER INSINCERE OR FACETIOUS. THE INVENTOR OF THE SYMPTOMETER WISHES TO POINT OUT THAT IT'S YOUR DOLLAR YOU JUST SPENT, LADY."

I could imagine the chuckle this would get from the old dowager, wise in the ways of such matters and smugly secure from any such contingency; the woman who would be most likely to feed in such confusing data.

I snatched another coin from Dennithy and pushed in the buttons which should give symptoms of pregnancy in the last week of the last month. The card read:

"MADAME CALL AN AMBULANCE. YOU HAVE NO BUSINESS DOWN TOWN!"

At first I was plain furious. The inventor was selling not only medical diagnoses, but providing penny arcade entertainment as well. Then the impossibility of reporting the

results of my investigation to the board struck me. In what conceivable manner could I phrase my findings and still maintain the dignity of our profession? And, worse yet, when you got right down to it, on what grounds could we outlaw and confiscate these machines?

TWENTY-FOUR quarters later I confirmed this suspicion. All ten machines were paragons of discretion. Each urged the patient to visit her doctor, or bore some other innocuous medical platitude. They were designed to painlessly accommodate the confirmed hypochondriac without wasting a busy doctor's time. And yet when a truly sick person indicated genuine symptoms, the diagnosis was general but accurate. The instruction to see a physician at once was urgently definite.

I was back before the dollar machine musing at my ugly expression in the mirror, when a light female voice behind me said, "I believe you have the wrong room, gentlemen."

She had short, bronzed, curly hair. She wore trim flannel slacks of dead white. Across her immaculate blouse was slung a pair of straps, one supporting a small tool kit, the other a stout leather pouch which rested on one shapely hip.

She looked, to my first embarrassed glance, cute, feminine, intelligent and quite amused.

"We, ah, we were not intruding, Miss," Dennithy spluttered. "I cleared the room so I could show this equipment to—" I kicked him in the shin "—to *Mister* Klinghammer. He—has a hotel on the west coast. He is interested."

The reason for this evasion was the fact that emblazoned in red over her left breast was the legend:

"JAYSEE SYMPTOMETER SERVICE"

"Clever machines," I flattered. "Well based in feminine psychology," I added, entirely overlooking that she might reasonably be expected to have the same psychology.

"I only service them," she said shortly. "Please step aside so I can operate." She gave me a long, searching look before she swung open the first top panel. Apparently satisfied I was merely a prospective customer, she let me look on.

A swift look inside gave me a virulent case of the quim-quim. Here was no simple coin-snatcher. The answer buttons were switches. From each one ran leads to a panel which bristled with tiny vacuum tubes. It was uncomfortably remindful of the latest in electronic calculators which were

rapidly gaining the reputation of being, "man's other brain."

"Tell me, Miss—"

"*Doctor Calicoo*," she prompted me pleasantly, as she slipped the tiny test prods of a miniature meter into the machine's mercenary heart.

"Tell me, Dr. Calicoo, how may I get in touch with the supplier of this equipment?"

She handed me a card and with it a slightly interested look that dropped my stability quotient at least three points.

The card was less interesting than the expression in her provocative blue eyes. I broke down and asked, "Doctor of what?"

"Philosophy. Electronics and Mathematics. You don't run a hotel," she said shrewdly.

"Make a liar out of Mr. Dennithy if you choose," I told her, "but would you be kind enough to take me to," I glanced at the card, "to Dr. John Cunningham?"

"I'll take you," she nodded, then her voice hardened a little, "but if you are just a snooper or a patent-jumper it will be no favor."

She invited candor, so she got it. I showed her my badge. Her mouth pulled into a startled little "o," like an oversized, pitted cherry.

We left Dennithy clinking quarters, trying to determine how he might figure into a possible scan-

dal. In the elevator to the basement garage I commented acidly, "You must have known this was inevitable, of course?"

"To the contrary," she parried, "I had a notion that a genuine M. P. sleuth would be ninety-two years old and wear a white coat with a stethoscope in his side pocket. You seem to have youth and a rather charming virility, Doctor."

"Cut the flattery," I said. "Let's find your car."

THE address was over in New Brooklyn. She slipped the light blue sedan into the proper cross-town tunnel entrance, adjusted the automatics and turned upon me suddenly. The dim reflection of the headlights from the dull-painted walls of the one-way tunnel gave her face a ghostly loveliness. I had just become sharply aware of this phenomenon, when she brushed a light, experimental kiss across my lips.

Volume II, of Dr. Bankaway's "Twenty-First Century Emotional Reactions to the Love Stimulus" notwithstanding, my socially-adjusted, medically-trained and professionally-restrained instincts played a rotten trick on me. Instead of staring at her with a cool eye and calming her with a proper, chilling remark, I responded like a frog's leg to an electric shock.

My chin jerked out to follow the sweetest sensation I could remember. It didn't have far to go. She had retreated only three inches.

The tunnel curved right there, and the car lurched. I made a bad connection with only half her mouth, but a slight correction on her part squared us off to what is outrageously described in the texts as a basic, or primary, wooing gesture.

After the first, delirious second I knew it was a frame. After the second moment, I didn't care. But it wasn't until several minutes had elapsed that Doctor Calicoo's cool resolve collapsed, and I learned what a kiss could really mean from a woman who meant it, herself.

She tore out of my arms with a little cry. "Look out!" Then I became aware that the warning light had been flashing unnoticed. We were coming to the tunnel's exit where manual vehicle control became necessary. With trembling hands she gripped the controls until her knuckles were white knobs.

As we flashed past the patrol station and two alert faces checked the interior of our car, I said, "I think I know what you had in mind. You had me hooked on but good. Why didn't you go through with it?" I referred to the easy possibility of our shooting from the tube in each other's arms

and thereby violating the safety code for tube passage. Such a simple frame would have put M. P. Investigator Klinghammer on the tabloid front page, if his feminine companion had chosen to file a complaint — with police witnesses to the act. Exit Klinghammer to a hobby of his own, probably less lucrative than building phantom symptom machines.

"I guess I overdid it," she said simply. She began to cry. Her white blouse quivered.

ALL I did was pat her gently on the shoulder, and the tears ran like mercury from a retort. "Let us not assume that we are enemies," I said, regaining a portion of my composure and all of my stuffiness. "So you *are* the frustrated Mata Hari; perhaps I'm on your side. Were you acting on orders? Was this a set up?"

She shook her head. "When we went into the tunnel I was in love with John Cunningham. I kissed you to frame you, all right, but it was my own idea. I'm impulsive, I guess." The only part I caught was the past tense of her first sentence.

"You mean you can change loves in the middle of a tunnel?" I blurted. Whereupon I learned one more "don't" that was never mentioned in lecture. The car slewed

to the curb. She jabbed the emergency stop switch, leaned across me and slapped open my door.

"Walk!" she commanded. The remaining tears were fairly steaming from her red cheeks. I was smart enough not to fumble for an apology. I walked.

When I found a cab, I had no chance to think clearly. The cabby bored me the whole way with the excited news of the opening of the Brooklyn Centennial Celebration. Brooklyn in the spring meant baseball, and the Bums were celebrating their one-hundredth year in the league.

"Only we're changing the name from 'de Bums' to 'de Boids.' 'De Blueboids' woulda been prettier, but a hockey team got to that name foist."

Brooklyn in the spring. Baseball. Love out of the blue. Blueboids. Plitudinous slot-machines.

When I stood before the gray, translucent door of Dr. John Cunningham's penthouse apartment, I was something less than the eager, efficient, young Dr. Klinghammer of the remarkable stability. From bed-rock to quicksand in one easy tunnel.

A MAN answered. He was at least one cut above the most adored idol of video and movie screen, his slacks even more un-

pressed and his beach shirt even gaudier. He looked me in the eye for a moment and said, "Dr. Sledgehammer, I presume?"

"Klinghammer," I corrected.

"Sorry. Sue seemed a little confused on several details. Come in, please."

Sue. Sue Calicoo. Out of the blue. Blueboids. John Cunningham. This was a disrupting thought. So this is the guy she's really in love with. Malpractice? Without a doubt.

I followed him into a spacious, skylighted room, a corner of which instantly caught my eye, first, because it contained Sue, and second, because it was the only orderly spot in the whole littered place. Sue sat in the tiny office-space at a small desk, furiously filing a finger-nail over a blue wastebasket. She didn't look up.

The look of tidiness ended there. The balance of the chamber gave a fair impression of a wholesale video-repair shop on moving day. Benches and racks were spaced at random, and each was loaded with electronic gear, meters, cable and tools. Unassembled units squatted in a semicircle before a large framework at the far end of the laboratory.

"May we be alone?" I asked.

"Alone?"

"Your girl friend, there," I said bitterly.

Cunningham tossed his blond head back and laughed. "Girl friend? That little fiend who calls herself my partner? Huh-uh! My girl friends are in there. Let's go introduce you." He started through a side door, and the unmistakable revelry of a cocktail party burst into the room.

Cunningham, himself, was not sober. I looked at Dr. Sue Calicoo. She hissed, "If you mention anything about the tunnel I'll brain you! Anything! Do you understand?"

I chased after Cunningham, hauled back with one hand and clipped him carefully with the other. I slammed the door and told Sue, "Help me sober him up."

She whistled softly. "He's not that drunk. Bring him to and you'll find out."

I worked on his heavy neck for a moment until his eyes flickered. I was in no mood to make him comfortable, so I just propped his back against a packing-case and took off on him. "What kind of a travesty on the practice of medicine do you call this?" I began.

Sue yawned and went to join the party. "Call me when the patty-cake is baked," she said as she closed the door.

The glare of hostility gradually vanished from Cunningham's handsome face. Without it he looked bet-

ter. He lit a cigarette, thought for a moment and smiled at me. "Have you been kissing my partner?"

I blurbled in my throat.

He went on, "You are acting as strangely as Sue did. I have often conjectured that if you could bottle Sue's kisses adrenalin would be obsolete."

"You—kiss her—often?" I asked against my will.

"Only twice. The day she came to work, and two weeks later when they took the stitches out of my head. The second one was just to show there were no hard feelings."

"She loves you," I said with inane persistence.

He shrugged, "Could be. But she means matrimony. I flunked that once. Won't take the test again. But now, Doctor, you didn't come here to make a match, surely. Sue reports that the M. P. board takes a dim view of my Symptom-meters. Have you filed a report yet?" he asked warily.

"Not quite yet," I admitted. Blueboids. Sue Calicoo. Brooklyn in the Spring.

"And when your respiration becomes normal again," Cunningham assured me, "I think you will realize that such a report will be difficult to file. Am I right?" He hoisted himself from the carpet. "You know," he went on, "this investigation was sure to come. I

knew it. And I guess it threw me a little more than I thought it would. Now that it's here I'm relieved. I think they sent the right man, Doctor Klinghammer."

HE fished a bottle from the debris on one of the benches and offered it to me. He did it in such a neighborly manner that in my preoccupation I accepted and tilted down at least a deciliter before coming to my senses. Then it was too late. A remarkable thing happened when that liquefied plutonium hit bottom. I twanged like a sixty-pound bow, and I began laughing. I felt sorry for this poor, misguided Romeo. The solution to his whole problem spread before me like an atlas.

Slowly his smile vanished. "Before we discuss this further, I'd like to impress a point or two. Those coin machines are only a means to an end." He pulled heavily at the bottle, took me by the arm and led me over to the huge, half-created machine at the end of the lab.

"This is my life's work," he said solemnly. "Between my exwife and this mechanical monster, I ran through a rather substantial family fortune. I had to have funds. So I excised a few of the simple circuits from this contraption, threw on some window dressing and turned them loose in a few key loca-

tions where women congregate. Yesterday, after three weeks of operation, sixty of those gadgets coughed up \$82,000. Unfortunately, I had to borrow almost a hundred thousand dollars to build them. In another week I'll show a profit."

"In another week," I told him, "you'll be held for malpractice and indicted for fraud—unless—"

"Unless I cut you in, I suppose," he sneered.

"Unless you give me another drink," I said after a suitable dramatic pause.

Cunningham pulled one eyebrow down, nonplussed, but he handed over the liquor. I choked on a swallow as Sue's voice cut over my shoulder, "I left you to play patty-cake, and now it's spin-the-bottle. Are you down to business, or shall I leave again?"

John said, "Stay here, kid, Doctor Hammerhead has an idea."

She came over and deliberately leaned up against him. He put his arm around her waist in what I tried to believe was a fraternal gesture.

"The name is Klinghammer," I said. "Don't antagonize me. I'm trying to help you."

Doctor Calicoo had recovered any selfcomposure she may have mislaid in the tunnel. She said sarcastically, "It couldn't be that you are trying to figure a way out

of this for yourself, could it?"

"Quit patronizing, both of you," I snapped. "You both know this will be embarrassing to the Board. But all I face is a big blush and an international horse-laugh. I'll grant you, we probably can't confiscate the machines. But my testimony could easily damn you for unethical practices if nothing else. With luck I might get you for fraud, too."

A look of synthetic concern passed between them. I took another drink. "I would like to know what possible justification you have for retaining the right to call yourself a medical man, Cunningham."

"What's wrong with research?" he demanded.

"In your case," I cracked, "nothing that a few scruples wouldn't improve."

Dr. Calicoo stamped her small foot at me. "Don't you make fun of us. John has a wonderful idea. His big general diagnosing correlator has some of the finest memory and calculating control circuits in it that exist anywhere." She nodded to herself. "I built them myself."

Cunningham explained earnestly, "It will assimilate and coordinate over a thousand separate symptoms, including every known particle of clinical data on a patient. Why it will reduce physician error to practically zero."

"If it works," I said sourly.

"It will, it will!" he assured me. "Of course I have probably a year or more to spend in quantitative calibration of the input circuits, and maybe a couple or three years on the qualitative differentiations of the output."

"I see," I said. "And you want to calibrate and differentiate without the necessity of practicing on the side to provide funds. So you invented the one-armed bandit with the Johns Hopkins accent to tide you over. Right?"

"Right!"

"You have made one mistake in the means to your end," I told him. "Now I have a plan." They both leaned forward, a little too far, I realize now.

MY report caused quite a sensation. The ten-man board read it and called me almost at once to clarify verbally what I had hinted to be a likely solution to our dilemma, namely: A desirable alternative to facing a mortifying legal action in restraining the present use of the Symptometer.

When I entered the rich, old mahogany chambers, the chairman pointed to the lecture stand. He was goateed and morbidly curious. Before I could clear my throat he urged impatiently, "Get at it, boy. What's this business of skin-



ning a cat you mentioned?"

"Honorable Doctors," I began self-consciously, "you all realize the legal difficulties with which we are faced. Before we face them, I give you the suggestion that we prevail upon the inventor of the Symptometer to license its manufacture for use only in medical clinics. Having operated the machines I can testify that the results of the questioning of these devices can be definitely informational and could assist a physician in more rapid diagnosis and treatment."

I held up my hand to silence the horrified grunts of disapproval. "Let me continue, please. A few minor changes in the recording mechanism would enable the equipment to produce a coded card. This, without a physician's attention, would direct the clinical staff to perform the necessary laboratory functions to verify or disprove the indicated symptoms. With this card and the results of the clinical examination in his possession, the physician then meets the patient for the first time. He has been spared the preliminary examination, the redundant, lengthy interview in which madame hypochondriac recapitulates the history of her hives or biliousness.

"Naturally, the coin operation of the machine would be eliminated. But there is no need for a doctor

to adjust his fees downward because he performs his work more efficiently, now is there? And with the Symptometer at his disposal, a physician should be able to easily double the number of office calls per hour.

"What does this do for the doctor? It frees him from so much of the annoying drudgery of patient interviewing. It eliminates the wait from first interview to final consultation. It keeps the laboratory details in their proper place. In short, it makes a true executive of the physician."

My eloquence was beginning to tell. All these men had long practices behind them. The practical advantages were undeniable. The important point, however, was that my radical suggestion did offer a less distressing alternative to bringing this into court.

The gray-fringed bald heads bobbed before me, and I knew from the higher pitch of their grunts and mutters that I was making my point. I was sweating, but then so were they.

THAT evening I phoned Cunningham. "You're in like Flynn," I told him. "Whether you like it or not, get those machines back and the changes made within a week. If we give them too much time to think about it they might

change their minds."

I thought I caught laughter in the background, but I hadn't made a video connection. I did so at once, and there was Cunningham with a suspiciously smug smirk on his face. "Thanks, old man," he said softly.

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "I thought you were reluctant about this idea?"

A babble of feminine voices and a background blur on the visor distracted him from my words. He turned away, then back to the screen. "Sue is on her way over to your suite to pick you up. Tonight we celebrate. My girl friends are here. Gotta go now."

The idea of a party just then was repugnant, but the thought of another cross-town ride with Sue was not. As I dressed I achieved an almost gala mood.

It persisted until I was beside Sue again, same car, same tunnel, same Spring in Brooklyn, but the Blueboids went fluttering when I identified the same smug smirk on her face that John Cunningham had betrayed a half hour ago.

"What," I demanded, "have you invented now?" She looked long into my eyes, and the amused look slowly left her. She leaned over to me.

With a perversity I was growing to hate I refused to accept this

perfectly good answer. "I sold your Symptometer to the Board, but I want you to know," I told her loftily, "that I'm not subscribing to your fantastic general diagnoser."

"Nooooo?" she said softly. She kept looking up into my eyes in a way, I am told, that women have of concentrating while pretending to listen.

"It's absurd," I pointed out. "Why, he needs five years just to calibrate the thing. It has no possibilities of mass-production. And even if it did, the cost would be so outrageous that the average hospital could hire a whole staff of physicians for the price of one machine. And figure one thing more: What medical man would welcome into his heart a gadget that would leave him nothing to do but stand around with a voltmeter and an oilcan?"

"Good point," Sue nodded with an exaggerated flounce of her auburn halo.

"Of course," I conceded, "if John wants to fiddle around with that pile of junk as a hobby, that's his business."

"Darrrrrrrling, you've been had," she said lazily. "That pile of junk we told you was a super-gadget was nothing more than an assembly jig and test rack for the Symptometer units."

"You misled me!" I exploded.

"That is the understatement of the week," she smiled sweetly. "But we couldn't have chosen a better Symptometer salesman if we'd had our pick when I phoned in that complaint to the Board and the Hotel Celt."

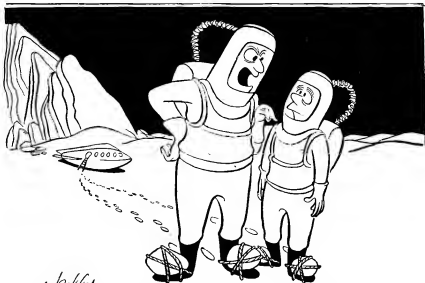
"You—you?" I stammered, my pulse loud in my ears.

"Yes, darling. And you were so sweet to get the solution so quickly. We didn't even have to suggest it to you." Somehow her arm had crept up behind me, and her fingers got inside the back of my over-heated collar. "Don't you understand? With John's trouble, what

chance do you suppose he would have had peddling those gadgets directly to any clinic? Anyway, what product ever started out in life with a better endorsement than that of the International Medical Association? Now SHEDDUP!"

I could have resisted the pressure of her arm, being a strong man. But a bega-volt thought hit me. She had everything out of me she had come for, so why did she want to kiss me unless—anyhow, we hit the tunnel curve just then.

Once again I didn't notice the warning signal light. And this time we got a ticket.



*Jack Klier*  
"When you loaded the ship I kept dinning it into you—Don't forget the weighted shoes — don't forget the weighted shoes!"

**Everybody hated the mutant children born near the radiation lab. Hush it up, Washington had directed. So Gretry was sent to dispose of—**

# The Crawlers

*By*

*Philip K. Dick*

**H**E built, and the more he built the more he enjoyed building. Hot sunlight filtered down; summer breezes stirred around him as he toiled joyfully. When he ran out of material he paused awhile and rested. His edifice wasn't large; it was more a practice model than the real thing. One part of his brain told him that, and another part thrilled with excitement and pride. It was at least large enough to enter. He crawled down the entrance tunnel and curled up inside in a contented heap.

Through a rent in the roof a few bits of dirt rained down. He oozed binder fluid and reinforced the weak place. In his edifice the air was clean and cool, almost dust-free. He crawled over the inner walls one last time, leaving a quick-drying coat of binder over

everything? What else was needed? He was beginning to feel drowsy; in a moment he'd be asleep.

He thought about it, and then he extended a part of himself up through the still-open entrance. That part watched and listened warily, as the rest of him dozed off in a grateful slumber. He was peaceful and content, conscious that from a distance all that was visible was a light mound of dark clay. No one would notice it; no one would guess what lay beneath.

And if they did notice, he had methods of taking care of them.

\* \* \*

The farmer halted his ancient Ford truck with a grinding shriek of brakes. He cursed and backed up a few yards. "There's one. Hop down and take a look at it. Watch the cars—they go pretty fast along



here."

Ernest Gretry pushed the cabin door open and stepped down gingerly onto the hot mid-morning pavement. The air smelled of sun and drying grass. Insects buzzed around him as he advanced cautiously up the highway, hands in his trouser pockets, lean body bent forward. He stopped and peered down.

The thing was well mashed. Wheel marks crossed it in four places and its internal organs had ruptured and burst through. The whole thing was snail-like, a gummy elongated tube with sense organs at one end and a confusing mass of protoplasmic extensions at the other.

What got him most was the face. For a time he couldn't look directly at it: he had to contemplate the road, the hills, the big cedar trees, anything else. There was something in the little dead eyes, a glint that was rapidly fading. They weren't the lustreless eyes of a fish, stupid and vacant. The life he had seen haunted him, and he had got only a brief glimpse, as the truck bore down on it and crushed it flat.

"They crawl across here every once in awhile," the farmer said quietly. "Sometimes they get as far as town. The first one I saw was heading down the middle of

Grant Street, about fifty yards an hour. They go pretty slow. Some of the teen-age kids like to run them down. Personally I avoid them, if I see them."

Gretry kicked aimlessly at the thing. He wondered vaguely how many more there were in the bushes and hills. He could see farmhouses set back from the road, white gleaming squares in the hot Tennessee sun. Horses and sleeping cattle. Dirty chickens scratching. A sleepy, peaceful countryside, basking in the late-summer sun.

"Where's the radiation lab from here?" he asked.

The farmer indicated. "Over there, on the other side of those hills. You want to collect the remains? They have one down at the Standard Oil Station in a big tank. Dead, of course. They filled the tank with kerosene to try to preserve it. That one's in pretty good shape, compared to this. Joe Jackson cracked its head with a two-by-four. He found it crawling across his property one night."

Gretry got shakily back into the truck. His stomach turned over and he had to take some long deep breaths. "I didn't realize there were so many. When they sent me out from Washington they just said a few had been seen."

"There's been quite a lot." The

farmer started up the truck and carefully skirted the remains on the pavement. "We're trying to get used to them, but we can't. It's not nice stuff. A lot of people are moving away. You can feel it in the air, a sort of heaviness. We've got this problem and we have to meet it." He increased speed, leathery hands tight around the wheel. "It seems like there's more of *them* born all the time, and almost no normal children."

BACK in town, Gretry called Freeman long distance from the booth in the shabby hotel lobby. "We'll have to do something. They're all around here. I'm going out at three to see a colony of them. The fellow who runs the taxi stand knows where they are. He says there must be eleven or twelve of them together."

"How do the people around there feel?"

"How the hell do you expect? They think it's God's Judgment. Maybe they're right."

"We should have made them move earlier. We should have cleaned out the whole area for miles around. Then we wouldn't have this problem." Freeman paused. "What do you suggest?"

"That island we took over for the A-bomb tests."

"It's a damn big island. There

was a whole group of natives we moved off and resettled." Freeman choked. "Good God, are there *that* many of them?"

"The staunch citizens exaggerate, of course. But I get the impression there must be at least a hundred."

Freeman was silent a long time. "I didn't realize," he said finally. "I'll have to put it through channels, of course. We were going to make further tests on that island. But I see your point."

"I'd like it," Gretry said. "This is a bad business. We can't have things like this. People can't live with this sort of thing. You ought to drop out here and take a look. It's something to remember."

"I'll—see what I can do. I'll talk to Gordon. Give me a ring tomorrow."

Gretry hung up and wandered out of the drab, dirty lobby onto the blazing sidewalk. Dingy stores and parked cars. A few old men hunched over on steps and sagging cane-bottom chairs. He lit a cigarette and shakily examined his watch. It was almost three. He moved slowly toward the taxi stand.

The town was dead. Nothing stirred. Only the motionless old men in their chairs and the out-of-town cars zipping along the highway. Dust and silence lay over

everything. Age, like a gray spider web, covered all the houses and stores. No laughter. No sounds of any kind.

No children playing games.

A dirty blue taxicab pulled up silently beside him. "Okay, mister," the driver said, a rat-faced man in his thirties, tooth pick hanging between his crooked teeth. He kicked the bent door open. "Here we go."

"How far is it?" Gretry asked, as he climbed in.

"Just outside town." The cab picked up speed and hurtled noisily along, bouncing and bucking. "You from the FBI?"

"No."

"I thought from your suit and hat you was." The driver eyed him curiously. "How'd you hear about the crawlers?"

"From the radiation lab."

"Yeah, it's that hot stuff they got there." The driver turned off the highway and onto a dirt side-road. "It's up here on the Higgins farm. The crazy damn things picked the bottom of old lady Higgins' place to build their houses."

"Houses?"

"They've got some sort of city, down under the ground. You'll see it—the entrances, at least. They work together, building and fussing." He twisted the cab off the dirt road, between two huge

cedars, over a bumpy field, and finally brought it to rest at the edge of a rocky gully. "This is it."

It was the first time Gretry had seen one alive.

He got out of the cab awkwardly, his legs numb and unresponding. The things were moving slowly between the woods and the entrance tunnels in the center of the clearing. They were bringing building material, clay and weeds. Smearing it with some kind of ooze and plastering it in rough forms which were carefully carried beneath the ground. The crawlers were two or three feet long; some were older than others, darker and heavier. All of them moved with agonizing slowness, a silent flowing motion across the sun-baked ground. They were soft, shellless, and looked harmless.

Again, he was fascinated and hypnotized by their faces. The weird parody of human faces. Wizen little baby features, tiny shoebutton eyes, slit of a mouth, twisted ears, and a few wisps of damp hair. What should have been arms were elongated pseudopods that grew and receded like soft dough. The crawlers seemed incredibly flexible; they extended themselves, then snapped their bodies back, as their feelers made contact with obstructions. They paid no attention to the two men;



they didn't even seem to be aware of them.

"How dangerous are they?" Gretry asked finally.

"Well, they have some sort of stinger. They stung a dog, I know. Stung him pretty hard. He swelled up and his tongue turned black. He had fits and got hard. He died." The driver added half-apologetically, "He was nosing around. Interrupting their building. They work all the time. Keep busy."

"Is this most of them?"

"I guess so. They sort of congregate here. I see them crawling this way." The driver gestured. "See they're born in different places. One or two at each farmhouse, near the radiation lab."

"Which way is Mrs. Higgins' farmhouse?" Gretry asked.

"Up there. See it through the trees? You want to—"

"I'll be right back," Gretry said, and started abruptly off. "Wait here."

THE old woman was watering the dark red geraniums that grew around her front porch, when Gretry approached. She looked up quickly, her ancient wrinkled face shrewd and suspicious, the sprinkling can poised like a blunt instrument.

"Afternoon," Gretry said. He tipped his hat and showed her his

credentials. "I'm investigating the—crawlers. At the edge of your land."

"Why?" Her voice was empty, bleak, cold. Like her withered face and body.

"We're trying to find a solution." Gretry felt awkward and uncertain. "It's been suggested we transport them away from here, out to an island in the Gulf of Mexico. They shouldn't be here. It's too hard on people. It isn't right," he finished lamely.

"No. It isn't 'right.'"

"And we've already begun moving everybody away from the radiation lab. I guess we should have done that a long time ago."

The old woman's eyes flashed. "You people and your machines. See what you've done!" She jabbed a bony finger at him excitedly. "Now you have to fix it. You have to do something."

"We're taking them away to an island as soon as possible. But there's one problem. We have to be sure about the parents. They have complete custody of them. We can't just—" He broke off futilely. "How do they feel? Would they let us cart up their—children, and haul them away?"

Mrs. Higgins turned and headed into the house. Uncertainly, Gretry followed her through the dim, dusty interior rooms. Musty cham-

bers full of oil lamps and faded pictures, ancient sofas and tables. She led him through a great kitchen of immense cast iron pots and pans down a flight of wooden stairs to a painted white door. She knocked sharply.

Flurry and movement on the other side. The sound of people whispering and moving things hurriedly.

"Open the door," Mrs. Higgins commanded. After an agonized pause the door opened slowly. Mrs. Higgins pushed it wide and motioned Gretry to follow her.

In the room stood a young man and woman. They backed away as Gretry came in. The woman hugged a long pasteboard carton which the man had suddenly passed to her.

"Who are you?" the man demanded. He abruptly grabbed the carton back; his wife's small hands were trembling under the shifting weight.

Gretry was seeing the parents of one of them. The young woman, brown-haired, not more than nineteen. Slender and small in a cheap green dress, a full-breasted girl with dark frightened eyes. The man was bigger and stronger, a handsome dark youth with massive arms and competent hands gripping the pasteboard carton tight.

Gretry couldn't stop looking at the carton. Holes had been punched in the top; the carton moved slightly in the man's arms, and there was a faint shudder that rocked it back and forth.

"This man," Mrs. Higgins said to the husband, "has come to take it away."

The couple accepted the information in silence. The husband made no move except to get a better grip on the box.

"He's going to take all of them to an island," Mrs. Higgins said. "It's all arranged. Nobody'll harm them. They'll be safe and they can do what they want. Build and crawl around where nobody has to look at them."

The young woman nodded blankly.

"Give it to him," Mrs. Higgins ordered impatiently. "Give him the box and let's get it over with once and for all."

After a moment the husband carried the box over to a table and put it down. "You know anything about them?" he demanded. "You know what they eat?"

"We—" Gretry began helplessly.

"They eat leaves. Nothing but leaves and grass. We've been bringing in the smallest leaves we could find."

"It's only a month old," the

young woman said huskily. "It already wants to go down with the others, but we keep it here. We don't want it to go down there. Not yet. Later, maybe, we thought. We didn't know what to do. We weren't sure." Her large dark eyes flashed briefly in mute appeal, then faded out again. "It's a hard thing to know."

The husband untied the heavy brown twine and took the lid from the carton. "Here. You can see it."

IT was the smallest Gretry had seen. Pale and soft, less than a foot long. It had crawled in a corner of the box and was curled up in a messy web of chewed leaves and some kind of wax. A translucent covering spun clumsily around it, behind which it lay asleep. It paid no attention to them; they were out of its scope. Gretry felt a strange helpless horror rise up in him. He moved away, and the young man replaced the lid.

"We knew what it was," he said hoarsely. "Right away, as soon as it was born. Up the road, there was one we saw. One of the first. Bob Douglas made us come over and look at it. It was his and Julie's. That was before they started coming down and collecting together by the gully."

"Tell him what happened," Mrs. Higgins said.

"Douglas mashed its head with a rock. Then he poured gasoline on it and burned it up. Last week he and Julie packed and left."

"Have many of them been destroyed?" Gretry managed to ask.

"A few. A lot of men, they see something like that and they go sort of wild. You can't blame them." The man's dark eyes darted hopelessly. "I guess I almost did the same thing."

"Maybe we should have," his wife murmured. "Maybe I should have let you."

Gretry picked up the pasteboard carton and moved toward the door. "We'll get this done as quickly as we can. The trucks are on the way. It should be over in a day."

"Thank God for that," Mrs. Higgins exclaimed in a clipped, emotionless voice. She held the door open, and Gretry carried the carton through the dim, musty house, down the sagging front steps and out into the blazing mid-afternoon sun.

Mrs. Higgins stopped at the red geraniums and picked up her sprinkling can. "When you take them, take them all. Don't leave any behind. Understand?"

"Yes," Gretry muttered.

"Keep some of your men and trucks here. Keep checking. Don't

let any stay where we have to look at them."

"When we get the people near the radiation lab moved away there shouldn't be any more of—"

He broke off. Mrs. Higgins had turned her back and was watering the geraniums. Bees buzzed around her. The flowers swayed dully with the hot wind. The old woman passed on around the side of the house, still watering and stooping over. In a few moments she was gone and Gretry was alone with his carton.

Embarrassed and ashamed, he carried the carton slowly down the hill and across the field to the ravine. The taxi driver was standing by his cab, smoking a cigarette and waiting patiently for him. The colony of crawlers was working steadily on its city. There were streets and passages. On some of the entrance-mounds he noticed intricate scratches that might have been words. Some of the crawlers were grouped together, setting up involved things he couldn't make out.

"Let's go," he said wearily to the driver.

The driver grinned and yanked open the backdoor. "I left the meter running," he said, his ratty face bright with craft. "You guys all have a swindle sheet — you

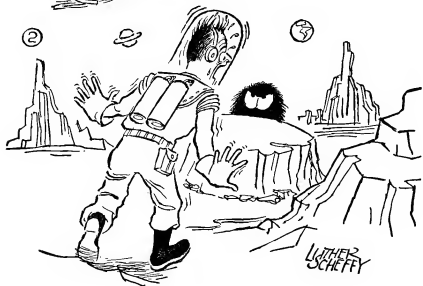
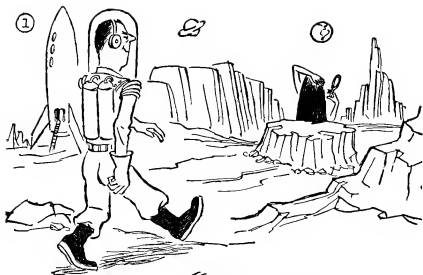
don't care."

HE built, and the more he built the more he enjoyed building. By now the city was over eighty miles deep and five miles in diameter. The whole island had been converted into a single vast city that honeycombed and interlaced farther each day. Eventually it would reach the land beyond the ocean; then the work would begin in earnest.

To his right, a thousand methodically moving companions toiled silently on the structural support that was to reinforce the main breeding chamber. As soon as it was in place everyone would feel better; the mothers were just now beginning to bring forth their young.

That was what worried him. It took some of the joy out of building. He had seen one of the first born—before it was quickly hidden and the thing hushed up. A brief glimpse of a bulbous head, foreshortened body, incredibly rigid extensions. It shrieked and wailed and turned red in the face. Gurgled and plucked aimlessly and kicked its feet.

In horror, somebody had finally mashed the throw-back with a rock. And hoped there wouldn't be any more.



**Narant's personal problem seemed of more importance than his mission as an interstellar investigator. But they combined when he met—**

# The Incredible Aliens

*By*

*William Bender, Jr.*

**I**T was only a tiny dot on the view screen when the military lookout on the armed cruiser identified it as an alien spaceship and sounded the general alert. Technician Ninth Class Narant, chief psych-analyst aboard, studied its approach with a rebellious, almost passionate hope that the impossible was at last going to happen.

Or was it impossible? They were the first men to visit this planetary system. Why couldn't they expect to encounter a truly superior race for a change?

Intently, Narant examined the course of the alien craft. Rather mischievously he hoped the stranger would suddenly adopt evasion tactics showing it had detected their presence in the black void between the 6th and 7th planets of the Star Restus. That would certainly be a

sign of superiority! And what a blow to Central Scientific Headquarters back home. The anti-detection shield was one of their proudest accomplishments.

And yet, though still wishful, Narant realized deep in his heart that such hopes were blighted. Illogical and improbable. No people in the Universe could even compare with them. Explorers and merchants and military ships and privateers had prowled all the great planetary systems of the galaxy. They and their technology reigned supreme everywhere. Indeed, the accumulated evidence of their supremacy even formed the irrefutable foundation of Central Scientific's dogma on selective breeding.

"I must ask you to leave the bridge now, doctor." The voice, crisp and authoritative, crackled over Narant's shoulder.



Commander Karsine had entered the control room during Narant's brief reverie in front of the viewing screen. An able and successful combat officer still in his early thirties, Karsine wore the light weight space armor the regulations prescribed for moments of impending action. Even if the enemy blasted a hole in the control room itself, that armor could protect Karsine long enough to save or disintegrate the cruiser, as the case might be.

"Commander," Narant suddenly blurted. "One request. I should like to remain this one time and observe your tactics right here."

"Denied." Karsine explained brusquely that only combat personnel were allowed in the central control room during contact with a strange vessel. "But," he ended, patronizingly, "you can watch from the observation room. When we have made the capture, I'll be happy to review my operations with you."

When we have made the capture. The Commander's abundant self confidence only served to further depress Narant. Out there in the void rode a space vessel of an altogether unknown race. And there was no question in Karsine's mind but that their cruiser would take the alien. Not "if" we make the capture. Simply, "when." It was small solace for Narant to recall that he

himself had firmly established Self Confidence as one of the highest-rated mental traits for military command. It had been one of his major projects as a Psychanalyst 4th Class.

AS he left the bridge, the airlock rumbled shut behind him, sealing off the control room from the rest of the ship. Narant climbed the spiral staircase into the observation room. One entire wall was a thick quartzite pane overlooking the control center. You could see as much from up here as down below. But somehow it wasn't the same.

Other technicians with non-combatant specialties were already strapped to seats in the room, prepared to watch the show on which their very lives might depend. The "VM" lamp winked slowly on and off, its orange glow warning against "possible violent maneuvers. Narant found a seat and obediently fastened the safety harness. He studied the view screen on the bridge below. The alien ship, seemingly unaware of the danger that now threatened it, still followed its initial course.

Narant tried to concentrate on the scrambling activity in the control center, but his rebellious mind would have none of it. Unwanted memories rose up to haunt



him. He had been assigned to this trip mainly to purge those thoughts from his mind with work and action, but the cure appeared no cure at all.

Three months ago his final request for the marriage permit had returned disapproved. The accompanying explanation had been a masterpiece of scientific doggerel. It analyzed the genetic composition of Narant and Technician 3rd Class Melda. It presented carefully worked-out Tables of Probability regarding the nature and potential achievement of the offspring of such a union. It called attention to the low probability rate of Melda and Narant begetting a genius. "Therefore," it had concluded, "it is not in the best interests of the intended participants, nor will it serve to build the race, if the aforementioned are joined in matrimony."

There followed a rare bit of sterilized philosophy: "It is to be hoped that each party mentioned in the above will readily find another individual in whom to repose his and her natural emotional interest." Narant felt, with a startling sense of the primeval, that if he should find the person who phrased that report he would delightfully club him to death.

But of course emotionalism was absurd. The whole thing had been

handled dispassionately. Certain basic factors had been fed into banks of electronic calculators and, a few micro-seconds later, the resultant statistical data came out. It simply failed to measure up. There was no arguing or quibbling about the results for the calculators were mechanically infallible.

However, Narant had taken one more step: an application for "random mating." But the retention drums of the master calculators had accumulated a far too overwhelming amount of information about the advantages of scientific breeding. So that application, too, had been refused.

And shortly after, Narant found himself assigned to this cruiser bound for Restus. A report that the inhabitants had begun space flight. A distant, but conceivable threat to the security of the home planet. He knew the assignment resulted from some scientific effort to mollify his disappointment. So he left home. But he took with him the forlorn hope that on this voyage, or the next, or the one after that, he would find somewhere in the vast reaches of space an advanced people who still practiced random mating; that he might find them, analyze them and feed that information back to the master calculators. For only by placing hard new facts into the "brain" could

there be any chance of changing the decision.

**I**N the sealed combat control center, Commander Karsine finished strapping himself into the anthropometric chair in front of the view screen. A subordinate lowered the master control panel into position. Narant perked up with new interest. A specialist of Karsine's class, he realized, could manipulate that control panel with the consummate skill of a master musician at a great organ. The battery of keys, buttons and switches built into the panel gave Karsine complete domination over the thousands of small engines and servo-mechanisms, tens-of-thousands of electric tubes, and the millions of electrical synapses that comprised the fighting apparatus of the space cruiser.

Abruptly the "VM" sign began flashing more rapidly, its color changing from orange to red. A siren whooped throughout the ship. Karsine's voice, somewhat metallic over the speakers, gave the "Imminent Combat" alert. The ship was going into action.

Narant felt the seat straps pull at his chest. In the view screen below, the alien vessel began to swell rapidly. A low hum permeated the observation room. Narant glanced out the nearest port. Glistening

metallic spines were expanding outward from the body of the cruiser. At the tip of each bulged the glowing cone of the force and detection heads, the cruiser's most potent tools of attack and defense.

"Engine room!" Karsine's peremptory voice snapped through the speakers.

"Engine room standing by."

"For ten seconds only, do not . . . repeat do *not* act on manual signal control. This is a test only. Read them off."

"Yes, sir. Reading test signals: Fire eight . . . fire six . . . fire nine . . . fire one . . . fire main." The voice paused. "Is that all, sir?"

"The ten seconds are up," reproached Karsine. Henceforth, his every command would have to be acted upon instantly. "Divert seventy per cent of main power supply into armament system."

"Yes, sir."

"Check spinal extension."

"Extended and locked. All force heads burning, Commander." Another voice had answered this time.

"Good." Karsine's brief acknowledgment for an efficient crew. "Activate the combat calculator."

"In action, sir."

There, Narant realized, was another de-humanizing achievement of Central Scientific Years ago in the war with the repulsive exo-

skeletal inhabitants of Sirius 13, earth's military commanders had gone into battle with terrible ardor. To destroy the Sirians they had taken frequent, unnecessary risks, and in so doing had sacrificed dozens of brand new combat ships. So a special calculator had been designed for all craft except humble merchantmen. It kept a running check on the enemy's tactics, his power output, his course, speed and relative aggressiveness; it measured the power consumption of its own ship in counteracting enemy weapons, and a score of other factors. Once activated, the "brain" computed the mathematical probabilities of ultimate success at each instant of the battle. If the scale ever tipped in favor of the enemy craft, the calculator instantly selected the best evasion course, fired auxiliary rockets and broke off the engagement.

NARANT unconsciously shook his head in disapproval. He wondered if he was getting old? Such efficiency disturbed him more than he cared to admit. Only in the histories, it seemed, could you find those thrilling battles where human ingenuity played the decisive role. Where a handful of courageous men could face outrageous odds and win through to victory by wit and resourcefulness.

Yes, only in the histories.

Nowadays warfare, like love, revolved about mathematics and probability curves and trillions of electrons chasing themselves through a maze of wires and throwing switches and making decisions that once had been the prerogative of man alone.

Narant yearned for man's lost freedom to make an honest error.

Suddenly Karsine's harsh voice came blasting over the loudspeaker. "Prepare to grapple!"

Narant glanced quickly out through the port into the black sky. The alien ship, its bright metal reflecting the light of the distant sun, floated a mile away. Motionless. Or so it seemed against the unchanging stellar background.

It possessed hard sleek lines, pointed nose, flaring tail vanes. Its designers, he guessed, must still be thinking in terms of atmospheric flight. It hardly seemed the type of craft that could cross the broad interstellar reaches; probably had been built simply to plod about its neighboring planets. It must be an early development, for spaceships had never before been detected in the Restus system. More than likely the ship had not even become aware of their presence. Small wonder Karsine had decided to grapple.

The force heads on Narant's side of the cruiser began to shimmer under the surge of power being fed

to them. They grew red hot, almost translucent. They would hold fire until the beam became powerful enough to withstand tremendous forces. Sometimes in grappling, an enemy craft had been known to discharge its main rocket batteries in an effort to wrench loose. But any second now. . .

"Execute grapple!" Karsine ordered.

The cruiser shuddered. Lights dimmed as the force heads sucked at every available bit of power. With a blinding flash, a blue-white ribbon of energy streaked across the mile-wide void to the alien ship. It flicked the nose of the Restus craft, gripped, and swept over the entire hull like a glittering cocoon.

"Tension indicator: Nine-eight-point-eight," reported a too-casual voice over the speaker. "Enemy ship secured."

"Opposing force?"

"Negative."

Karsine cautiously studied his dials, alert for the first sign of a counter-blow. Nothing happened. A minute dragged by. The tension indicators remained constant; detection heads, zero. And then: "Bring it alongside."

The grappling beam slowly began to contract, bringing the alien ship closer. As it passed through the invisibility screen, multi-colored

de-action rays focussed upon it, nullifying virtually every weapon known to man.

Narant's hopes dissolved. The emptiness left only an aching futility. As usual, the capture had been simple. . .and complete.

"Advance parties prepare to go aboard," commanded the loud-speaker.

A man behind Narant unbuckled his straps, got up and stretched. "Here we go again," he said. And then, to nobody in particular: "I used to get a kick out of investigating strange creatures. Now it's work. Just work."

Narant looked over his shoulder at the cruiser's anthropometrist. He would have to board the ship right behind the combat team, analyze the tools, controls, living conditions of the crew. Perhaps he, too, experienced this ennui of persistent success?

NARANT had ended his preparations in the psych-examination chamber by the time they brought the first of the alien people to him. Narant stared in sudden amazement. The creature was humanoid. It had a well-formed head with a squat, shrunken nose and steep brows; there were prehensile arms, and hands with five fingers. But the man was hairy and, Narant winced, immodestly naked.

The humanoid was still in the grip of the paralytic when they took him into the examination chamber and strapped him to the table. Narant judged the alien a little taller, give or take a few inches, than a normal human being. His interest began to perk up. It always did when he could study another creature that had learned to conquer space. For perhaps the first time in three months, thoughts of Melda were over-shadowed by the immediate prospect of exploring the mysteries of an alien mind.

As the attendant came back out of the chamber, Narant secured the door. "How many of them?" he asked.

The attendant shook his head in evident amazement. "Four. I don't know how they do it, but that ship had only a four man crew."

"Impossible," Narant exclaimed.

"That's all there are," the man insisted. "We've covered the whole ship."

"But how could they . . . ?"

"The engineers are working on that now. I heard one of them remark about the great number of automatic controls, but even so. . . isn't that one for the book?"

That, Narant agreed, was one for the book. Four men. The space vessels he knew usually held scores of crewmen and specialists to handle the manifold emergencies that arose

in flight. His imagination soaring, Narant turned rapidly to begin his experiments.

He started the automatic recorder that would code his findings on a thin strip of tape and then, more excited than usual, began the examination. Inside the chamber, a giant multi-faceted crystal began to rotate slowly in the gimbals which held it suspended from the ceiling. Sharp individual beams of light swept over the face of the alien being on the table. One by one, the lights flickered over him and passed on, each one probing, measuring, comparing with universal norms, and then recording its findings on both dial and tape.

Long before the five-hour examination was over, the hopes of Technician 9th Class Narant far transcended any he had experienced in the past three months. The aliens had almost human potential. They were fun-loving, kindly, clannish. Their resourcefulness *and their ingenuity* were literally unsurpassed.

But then the most amazing fact of all revealed itself: The time-lapse since this race had been entirely primitive was fantastically short. In one brief—almost abrupt—transition, they had gone from jungle to the conquest of space. The mind, the racial background and the obvious achievements of these creatures presented such a

picture of rapid advancement as to stagger the imagination.

Once he had transmitted the coded tapes to Central Scientific, Narant sought out the anthropometrist. His lingering doubts vanished when the two compared findings. Everything inside the spaceship had been designed expressly for these strange creatures with the five fingers and the prehensile hands and arms.

As the cruiser finally pointed toward home, Narant was a new man. Of course their information would set the scientific world spinning on its collective ear. But more important, it would have vast personal significance. According to the crystal, the mating pattern of these surprisingly progressive beings was entirely one of random selection!

Already that data would be digesting inside the master calculators. The knowledge would become a part of all future decisions. Probability rates would change strikingly. . . especially those that governed the issuance of "random-mating" licenses. For Narant, the voyage had been a tremendous success.

\* \* \*

**H**OWEVER, in the space experimental laboratories near the Nevada desert on the third planet of the sun Restus, no such optimism existed.

Twenty-four hours had passed

since the S-X-2 had vanished. They had had a precise fix on it as it blistered through the void on an elliptic course that would return it automatically to Earth. Everything had seemed to be going perfectly. All the bugs of the first Spacerocket Experimental had evidently been straightened out in making the "2". And then, some 250-thousand miles beyond Saturn, it had disappeared. Just like that.

Dr. Gordon Basset glanced distastefully at the telephone on his desk. Then he began thumbing through the metropolitan directory for a number. The hands that held the directory were strong, supple. They would have been a revelation to Technician Ninth Class Narant, if he had seen them.

But then Technician Ninth Class Narant himself would have been something of a revelation to Dr. Gordon Basset, what with his twenty claw-like extensors.

Basset found the number, dialed, and waited for the connection

"Hello, Dr. Farrell? Basset, here. I've got bad news on the S-X-2. . . No details yet, but the ship has broken contact. . . Yes, I must presume it's lost. . . I'll file a complete report as soon as possible. . . What's that? . . I suppose you're right—we'll have the S.P.C.A. on our necks for sacrificing four more test ani-

mals. What the hell, they can't expect us to send men on these experimental flights!"

Basset talked for a moment longer and then replaced the phone.

He sighed. Another report. Another failure. Another requiem to be written for a lost ship—and four chimpanzees.

THE END



"This is a pretty pickle—the ship wasn't insured!"



# MESSENGER

*By*

*William Morrison*

**He had to find a single planet somewhere  
in the vast Universe. The trouble was, if he  
found it—would he remember what he must do?**

**H**E knew that there had been trouble, and he had been told what he had to do. The trouble was he had forgotten. He didn't remember where it was.

He had been speeding past an off-color white dwarf when it happened. If he had taken the trouble to look around, he would have seen that the white star was going to explode. He knew a potential nova when he took a good look at

one. But after all these centuries he had grown careless, and when the blast had come—the small star suddenly blazing into a billion-fold brilliance—the penetrating radiation had hit him with full intensity. There had been no ship to protect him, no clothing that might serve as a shield. His kind had done away with such things eons before, as they had learned to move through space by using some of



the radiant energy that filled it.

He had blacked out completely.

When he came to again, he was far past the nova, in the dazzling brightness of a rarefied cloud of radiant hydrogen atoms. The nova itself had lost so much of its momentary brilliance that it was now indistinguishable from the myriads of other stars. He himself was speeding on with feverish haste toward a nebular cluster a thousand light years away.

He slowed down. He had the feeling that the distant cluster was not his proper destination. But what was? What star, what planet was the spot in space he had to find? And what was he supposed to do once he got there?

And who had given him the instructions? Where, in the vast immensity of the universe was the place called "home", the place where he could return for the information he had forgotten?

He didn't recall. He knew only, with that same distressing vagueness, that somewhere there was something he had been ordered to do. And that once given, the order had to be carried out.

He traveled aimlessly, by feeling alone. Time meant nothing to him as an individual, for his kind had long mastered the problems of age. But time meant much to those he had been sent to—to do what?

Was it to help? They must be waiting for him now. They must be wondering why he didn't come.

He would have to hurry. Hurry to do something he didn't yet suspect, but would sooner or later remember.

After a few centuries, he began, in his anxiety, to talk to himself, as is the way of individuals too long alone. "That star cluster there could be it," he said to himself hopefully, and veered toward the right.

"Doesn't look familiar, though," he muttered. "Maybe if I would get closer—"

He came close enough to see the thousands of stars as individuals, to pick out the satellites circling the bright discs of light, to study the pale planets themselves and their tiny subsatellites. As he turned his attention from one to another, disappointment slowly filled him. No, this was not the place. There was nothing in the configuration of the stars, nothing in the size or position of the planets that sounded a familiar chord in his consciousness. He would have to go further—or turn back.

HE left the place behind him. The next time the same thing happened he didn't have quite so much hope, and his disappointment was less keen. But it was

disappointment none the less. Time was passing, and they must be waiting for him impatiently.

After a while the hope and the disappointment both died away almost completely. The former shrank to a tiny spark that grew dimmer and dimmer as the centuries passed. He wondered if it would ever wink out entirely.

It was characteristic of him that the anxiety this caused was only for those who were waiting, expecting him hourly, and wondering why he didn't come. He had no sense of fear for himself, no feeling of despairing loneliness that might be expected to arise from being so long isolated in space. It was only that he would have liked some one to talk to, besides himself.

On a fair number of planets he found animal-like creatures in different stages of development, and on a few he discovered life that was intelligent. It was with these that he had a renewed feeling of anticipation, the spark of hope glowing momentarily before it faded again.

"It's intelligent life I've got to find," he told himself. "But where?"

His astronomical memory, insofar as it covered the post-nova period, was perfect, and he paid more attention to the details of star-and-planet configuration than he had

ever done before. Gradually a star-map formed in his mind, a map that covered enormous distances of space. Those places he had investigated and eliminated from consideration were slowly crossed off. It was a large needle he had to find, and his own powers were considerable, but the haystack he had to search was infinite. There was no telling how many more centuries would pass before he found it.

And then another thought struck him. They'd know back home that something had gone wrong. Would they send someone else to do the job in his place?

He rather doubted it. He had a vague feeling that there weren't many with his own peculiar talents. What had to be done had to be done by him, or left undone altogether.

More time passed. And one day, when the space charted on his brain-map had grown to vast dimensions, and the spark of hope had become so tiny that he was not quite sure any longer that it was there at all, he noted from a distance a galaxy that seemed familiar.

"That's it!" he cried. "That's it!"

The spark flared, and as he sped toward the galaxy it became a flame. It was a lens-shaped as-

semblage of stars, with two small spiral arms composed of a few million stars each, and it was seemingly not too different from millions of other galaxies he had passed in the course of all those centuries. But to him, seeking so desperately, this galaxy was unique. It was the right one. He coursed through it from spiral arm to spiral arm, and now there could be no doubt. The star he wanted was small and yellowish, far from the center of the lens. It had a rather elaborate planetary system, which he recognized at once.

This was it. The third planet, the one with a single subsatellite, was the one he had been sent to find. To find, and perhaps to help. But how?

The finding of the planet had solved one problem. So far it had given him not a hint toward the solution of the second—the reason why he had been sent here.

**T**HERE was life on this ball of mud and water, a great deal of life, both vegetable and animal. And some of the latter could, without too great a distortion of the truth, be called intelligent. It had raised cities, tunneled into mountains, changed the appearance of sections of the planet itself. It was to this intelligent life that he had been sent.

A dim memory of the need for caution kept him from letting himself be seen. "I'd only frighten them," he thought. "I'll have to investigate thoroughly before I reveal myself. And maybe the investigation will remind me of what I have to do."

The first thing was to come down to earth. Choosing the dark side of the planet, shaded from the central sun by its own bulk, he shrank his body and let himself drop in the gravitational field. From time to time he slowed his fall in order to keep from flaming through the atmosphere and attracting their attention. And at a thousand feet above the surface he came to a complete stop, hovering over a city, and making up his mind where to land.

Something droned toward him through the air, colored lights winking on and off. He darted downward and to one side. Where the city lights faded out, he let himself fall all the way to the ground.

He was off a dimly lit highway. Small metal vehicles ran along it, their lights momentarily tearing apart the darkness ahead of them. A glance through the metal at the creatures inside the vehicles gave him a queer thrill. Yes, these were the ones he had been sent to.

Quickly reshaping his body and clothing himself so that he seem-

ed to be one of them, he began to walk along the highway. Cars sped past him, picking him out in their headlights. None of them stopped, but he had time to probe their minds and listen to their language.

What he found was not pleasant. Among all the feelings which controlled their thoughts, fear was easiest to detect. And along with the fear were hatred and envy and greed, anxiety and guilt. Oddly enough, there were also hope and affection for each other, but it was the worse feelings that predominated. There was no doubt that they needed help.

That didn't make any clearer, however what he had to do. He had an idea that it was not his mission to work out a detailed solution. He had to do some simple thing, something—

The two men were lying in wait, either for him or for some other pedestrian they judged sufficiently unwary. He sensed them long before the first one stepped out toward him, a cigarette in one hand and what was supposed to be an ingratiating look on the brutal face.

"Got a match, bud?"

The other man suddenly plunged at him from the side, an arm wrapping itself around his neck. The assailant tried to bend him back, the forearm cutting across his

windpipe. The arm of the first man swung, a rough fist smashing at his face.

Then the two assailants screamed in pain and terror. Where they had touched him, fist and arm broke into flame. Both men turned from him in horror, and ran off wildly, as if to get away from themselves.

He hadn't meant to hurt them, but they had contrived their own punishment. Perhaps — no, that wasn't it. He wasn't here to punish either.

He walked along, and soon he found himself entering the city. A man in a blue uniform watched him suspiciously and ordered him gruffly to get moving.

"I am moving," he said pleasantly.

"Don't you get wise with me," said the bluecoat, and raised a threatening club.

He paid no attention to the club and kept on, toward the heart of the city.

What he saw only confirmed the impression he had obtained from the minds of the men and women in the cars. Too many thoughts were mean and ignoble, arising only from selfish and vicious desires. Many of those who saw him seemed to sense his strangeness, and moved toward him with a single impulse—to take advan-

tage of his ignorance. Men spoke to him out of the sides of their mouths, offering him bargains. Women offered themselves.

*"Look, Mac, this stuff is hot, see? Just came off a truck—"*

*"Wanta look at some nice pictures, Mister?"*

*"I can give you a good address, Bud."*

*"Out for a good time, Jack?"*

The planet was sick. Had he been sent to cure it?

HE came to an area of broad lighted streets. Lights glittered everywhere, attracting the attention of those around him by going on and off. Great posters advertised the attractions inside places of amusement.

He entered one of them, an astonished ticket-collector calling after him, "Hey, where's your ticket, Bud?" But there was something about him that prevented the man from pursuing.

He lost himself in the darkness and watched the screen. Here, in brief and vivid form, was pictured the life of the planet. Women in bathing suits plunged into a pool and formed a pattern which imitated sensuously the petals of an unfolding rose. A small animal leaped through hoops and climbed a ladder. Groups of men drove against each other for possession of

an object which they kicked occasionally into the air. An elderly man looked grim and made a speech into a microphone. And then a film showed the main business of the planet, which seemed to be the killing of its supposedly intelligent inhabitants. Bombs exploded, planes crashed, desperate lines of men ran forward to meet their deaths.

Something quickened in his mind. He almost remembered now. This was what he had come here about.

His will moved, and the theatre vanished behind him. Now he was on the battlefield itself.

The reality was worse than the image, far worse. Here were not only the roars of the great guns, but the curses and screams of the wounded, the gasps of the dying. Here were not only horrible sights and sounds, but the odors of death—the sharp nitrogenous fragrance of explosives, the heavy sulfurous smoke of burning oil, the sickening smell of sweating or decaying flesh.

A cloud came into being from the explosion of a mortar shell, and two men dropped to the ground. In answer to the mortar, the flaring barrel of a tank gun spoke hoarsely, and half the crew of the mortar fell in turn. But there seemed no end to this deadly dialogue. The next moment there

came the burst of a bomb from a low-flying plane, and the tank half turned over on its side, a heap of smoking steel.

He knew at last why he had been sent here. He knew now what he had to do.

He ripped the flaring-mouthed gun from the tank. His hands twisted the thick metal into a shape it had never known before, bent it into a strange curve, fashioned it so that it would emit over-

tones to chill the souls of those who heard it. His brain charged the instrument with the energy of his own mind, energy that would send its voice to the far corners of this diseased planet, and leave not a single individual deaf to its dreaded tones.

Putting the improvised horn to his lips, Gabriel blew the call for which the planet had so long been waiting.

THE END

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## INTRODUCING the AUTHOR



*Winston Marks*



*(Concluded from Page 2)*

Next best thing seemed to be to write about doctors, which I do quite frequently. I like doctors. I value highly my acquaintances in the medical fraternity and highly respect their profession. It is my enduring sorrow that they rarely reciprocate. Like others who read my stuff, they shake their heads and mutter, "It takes all kinds—"

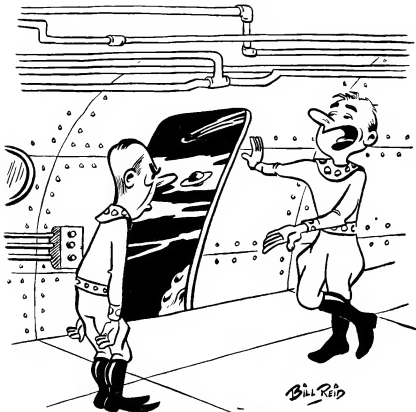
Besides doctors, I like my wife, my daughters and other women, probably because they're all mysteries, too. Don't get me wrong. I get along fine with men, but they're so predictable!

I like writing about the future for the same reason that I like women, it's so unpredictable, or

should we say variously predictable. Imaginative fiction has seasoned my reading diet since I discovered Verne and the first issue of the old *Amazing*. It is not a stupefying coincidence, therefore, that when I turned to free-lancing a year ago, I should major in science-fiction and fantasy. So far, science-fiction hasn't majored in Marks (only 23 clicks out of a hundred tries) but I'm striving to better that record.

Recently, I read that the average author earns \$1500 a year from his writing. Alas! We've forgotten what steak tastes like, but look, ma! No income tax!

—*Winston Marks*



"Would you care to step outside and repeat that remark?"

**FEATURED NEXT MONTH:—**

## **PHANTOM WORLD**

**by DANIEL F. GALOUBE**

What happens when a space ship exceeds the speed of light? Does it vanish with its crew—lost forever in a fantastic nether region of sub-space? Don't miss this action-packed novel with a startling scientific concept!

**FOR FABULOUS FREE BOOK-SUBSCRIPTION SEE PAGE 130**

# BIRTHDAY PRESENT

By

*Arnold Marmor*

**Diane's husband spent most of his time on Mars, and I spent most of mine with Diane. It was a nice arrangement — much too nice to last!**

“It's tonight or never,” Diane said.

“Yes,” I said.

I watched her as she walked back and forth across my bedroom floor. She had on a sheer plasto dress that clung to her round white breasts and full milky thighs. “I'm picking him up at the spaceway,” she said. “We're supposed to go dining and dancing tonight.” She stopped pacing. “It's my birthday. I'm thirty today.”

And I was twenty-four and in love. Six years between us. So what? I didn't give a damn. I wanted to marry her, to live with her.

“I'm thirty,” she said again. “Do you mind?”

“I know your age. Why bring it up?”

“Someday you'll find out you married an old woman. If we ever do marry.”

“Stop it.” I got off the bed, went

to her. “Just tell me what to do and I'll do it.”

“Do you love me?” she looked up at me.

“You know I do.”

“Say it.”

“I love you.”

“Never stop saying that.” She put up her face and I kissed her. A long hard kiss. She broke away. “You'll be in back in the racer. Just crouch low. As soon as we're away from the spaceway you hit him with the wrench. It has to be quick and sure. Then we carry him up to the apartment and drop him out the window.”

I shuddered a little as she talked. She was so calm about the whole thing.

“You'll have plenty of time to get out. It'll be listed as a suicide. He's been sick for a long time. His doctor will testify to that. He was so sick and worried he jumped to



his death."

She stared at me hard. "Is it all clear?"

"Yes." I looked at her. Her long blond hair, her oval face, the slim white column that was her throat. "It's all clear. Like glass."

I poured myself a drink. I needed it. I was going to need a lot more.

"We won't be able to see each other for a long time," she said. She watched me drink. "We don't want to give our friends something to talk about."

"I won't like not seeing you."

She patted my face. I put down my drink, caged her slender hand in mine, and kissed her wrist. I saw the light blue veins criss-crossing under the delicate skin.

I brought her close to me. I kissed her warm lips. "Baby," I breathed. "Diane, baby."

"Paul, listen to me. We haven't much time."

"All right, sweet." I kissed her again.

"Come on. We can't afford to get there late."

**I** crouched low in the back of the racer. I heard the street noises, the gab of the night crowds, the not-so-mild cursings of the taxi-jet drivers.

It all seemed so unreal. Back there, on my haunches, a wrench

gripped tight in my sweaty hand. I was going to kill a man. A man I knew, a man I respected. And for a woman. All for a woman. I thought about getting up and telling Diane to go to hell and to get herself another stooge. I thought about a lot of things. Then I thought of Diane. Her sweet white body. The way she sighed when I kissed her hard. And I knew I was going to go through with it.

The racer stopped, its jets cut off. I heard the hum as the door opened and she got out.

This was it. I sweated. It dripped down in an endless stream.

The seconds went by. Then the minutes.

They got in and the door hummed shut and I heard their laughter blending together. They settled back and the jets roared. The racer woke up to new life and it shot away.

"How was the trip?" I heard Diane asking.

"Cold. And I'm not sure it was worth it. Those Martians drive a hard bargain." He coughed. "Diane, you're not too set on going out tonight, are you?"

"Why?" she asked.

"I thought how nice it would be if we spent the evening at home."

"Just as you say, Roger."

"You don't care?"

"Of course not."

She was so calm, so damn calm. There would never be another like Diane.

"You won't regret it," Roger promised.

"My, but this boulevard is deserted," she said. "Not a soul in sight."

That was for my benefit. It was my cue.

I sat up silently.

He saw me then in the rear-view mirror. "What the hell?" He started to turn.

My arm sprang alive. The wrench thudded against his skull. A half cry spilled from his lips. Then his head fell forward on his chest.

"Hit him again," Diane urged.

"But—"

"Do as I say."

I hit him again, hard.

It was done. I settled back. The wrench was still in my hand. I looked at it, then let it fall.

"Are you all right?" Diane asked.

"Yes," I said. "Why shouldn't I be?"

"You're not going to be sick, are you?"

"No! You think I'm a kid?"

"You did it for an old woman."

"Stop it."

"Today is my birthday, don't you know? I'm thirty."

"Shut up."

"I wonder what he got for my birthday."

"Please."

"I'm sorry. Really I am. I feel like talking. If I don't I think I'd scream."

So I let her talk. I didn't answer her. She babbled away like she was crazy. She kept it up till we got to their apartment.

Diane got out first and made sure the way was clear. "We'll use the back stairs," she said when she got back. "We both can manage him."

It was dark and it was late and we didn't see anybody. We went through the service entrance. It was too heavy a load for me to do it alone. Two flights up. Diane helped me with him.

I breathed easier when we were in the marble hall outside the apartment. She quickly unlocked the heavy plastic door and we got him inside. She fumbled for the inner-lighting switch.

"Happy birthday," they shouted.

Now I knew why Roger had wanted to spend the evening at home.

We stood there, Diane and myself, with Roger between us.

Then they stopped shouting and stared at us. I thought they would never stop staring.

THE END



# Space Beacon



**N**OVICES to the concept of space travel invariably remark about the terrifying loneliness and blackness of interplanetary space, forgetting that rocketeers will have at hand a perpetual guide, an eternal beacon, always leading them—the Sun.

The role of the Sun in interplanetary navigation will be most important. Those who speak glibly of "radio beacons", etc. in space forget that Men must go out and put them there and secondly that is a tough job in itself. Until radio-in-space becomes established, guidance by the Sun will be standard. But how?

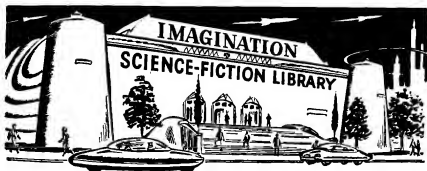
All you do is measure the Sun's apparent diameter with an instru-

ment much like the sextant used today. This tells you immediately how far from the Sun you are. Then you do the same thing with a recognizable planet, and these two shots, plus a little trigonometry, locate you, assuming you are approximately in the plane of the ecliptic.

In a spaceship, the Sun and planets don't go out, or wear out, or blow a tube! Those beacons are always there. You can't get lost in space! Of course, once the exploratory voyages are over, radio chain beacons can be established and the orienting process can be automatic. But until then, spacemen will keep their eyes on the Sun!



"I'm all for setting them adrift with our three prisoners from Venus!"



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

*Conducted by Henry Bott*

**Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.**

**6 GREAT NOVELS OF SCIENCE FICTION**

*Edited by Groff Conklin. 384 pages. paper bound—\$35. Dell Books. New York, N. Y.*

While many of these stories will be familiar to the aficionado, they are such a stellar lot that not one can afford to be missed—especially at the price!

There is Cloete's "Blast," an oft-told — but here exceedingly well — tale of the last days on Earth.

Immediately following is Heinlein's novelette, a masterpiece of course, called "Coventry."

Then Leinster's "The Other World," Boucher's "Barrier" (superb writing as well as an interesting story!), Blish's "Surface Tension" and Sturgeon's "Maturity."

That is the feast. Not one of these pieces is bad, most are excellent and one is superior.

"Coventry" is without question one of Heinlein's little perfections, written during the time he was concerned with his work and before he drifted into the inevitable mediocrity that seems to mar success in s-f as well as in other fields. Here is writing, characterization, action, boldness and subtlety.

Sturgeon was and is an excellent writer. If his ideas and themes were of the caliber of his ability to use words, he'd have no peer. In spite of this judgment, it must be admitted that "Maturity" is a fascinating story of the super-being.

Cloete's "Blast," the familiar post atomic-blasted world, leaves nothing to be desired. Perhaps it is because the story exists in an air of optimism unusual for this type of thing.

## BORN LEADER

by J. T. McIntosh, 221 pages \$2.95.  
Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York.

The Earth was dying, a victim of its atomic stupidities, but this no longer mattered to the daring colonists of the planets *Mundis* and *Secundis* which cursed their elliptical paths around Brinsen's Star.

Rog Foley, dynamic young leader of the Mundans knew that a new, powerful and humane civilization would arise. Sanguine and optimistic, he was leading a new breed of men when the star-ship appeared. Men, it appeared, were destined to struggle no matter where they went. The test is always by fire.

This is not an intellectual play nor an idea-rich story. And yet it is considerably more than "gee-whizz" space adventure. Here are perfectly believable people in an unbelievable situation—and there is no contradiction.

Often the heroic space novel degenerates into a "cops and robbers" opus, ridiculous and unentertaining. *Born Leader* does not. Soundly rooted in science, a good portion of the novel has the charm of *Swiss Family Robinson* with its emphasis upon details. Where action occurs, the pace is exciting and sustaining. For hours of interesting and exciting reading, you couldn't do better than *Born Leader*.

## SCIENCE FICTION CARNIVAL

Edited by Fredric Brown and Mack Reynolds. 315 pages. \$3.50. Shasta Publishers. Chicago, Ill.

Here is a merry, crazy, wacky collection of humor.

What's the difference between a man and an ant?—the editors ask rhetorically. A man can laugh!—they answer, and using this vital answer as a springboard, they present us with an anthology guaranteed to cure you of all ills.

The stories are authored by Matheson, Arthur, Leinster, Shaw, Fyfe, Tenn, Jackson, Brown, Russell, Reynolds, Kuttner, Smith, Bond,—what could *they* possibly have in common that would make them worthy of a special anthology? The answer is of course, a rib-tickling sense of humor.

You'll find nothing Earth-shaking here or significant!—you'll

laugh.

"The Martians and the Coys", by Mack Reynolds and from the pages of this magazine, alone is worth the price of the book. Unquestionably it is one of the funniest pieces of writing, and nothing in science fiction has approached it for sheer bubbling laughableness.

"Venus and the Seven Sexes" by William Tenn, "Paradox Lost" by Fredric Brown, "A Logic Named Joe", by Murray Leinster — these hilarious titles will barely suggest their gayety.

It's not easy to write humorous science fiction and a good funny s-f tale is as rare as the proverbial hen's tooth. Never-the-less, the compilers have done a fantastic job in managing to find these little jewels. You won't read these and weep—you'll roar!



*Conducted by Mari Wolf*

**I**T won't be long until it's Convention time again, time for the 12th World Science Fiction Convention, Labor Day Weekend, 1954. Each year the Convention is held in a different part of the country, so that over a period of years it should be possible for a fan living in any region to attend at least one of the get togethers. This year the Convention returns to the West Coast, and it's San Francisco in '54.

There are a few lucky people who manage to attend almost every major science fiction gathering. Editors, of course, are among this class; a trip across country can be written off on the expense account. Some writers and artists manage to cover a large amount of territory from year to year in order to attend. But it's harder for the fan, especially the fan with an average income and a job or school work

that doesn't allow time for a slow bus trip or hitchhiking jaunt across country.

Most fans have to be content to attend only the Conventions that are held within a few hundred miles of their homes. This means that it's often three or four years after their first one before they can manage to attend another. West Coast readers will find it easy to attend this year. The Convention promises to be a fine one; the San Franciscans will make everyone welcome; and if you've never even been to a regional get together you have a treat coming.

In addition to the annual Conventions that are the really big events in the science fiction world, there are many smaller conferences and conclaves held by regional groups of science fiction fans. It's quite likely that, no matter in what part of the country you live, there

will be at least one stf gathering held within commuting distance of you this year. Lots of times you can have almost as much fun at these smaller gatherings as you can at the World Conventions; however, there's something about the big Cons that's extra special.

The '54 affair is really a combination of the regional and the national (or international). Before Philadelphia voted the '54 Convention to San Francisco, West Coast fans had voted it the '54 Westercon, or West Coast Science Fiction Convention. This affair, a sort of half-sized Convention drawing fans from all over the western United States, was held last year in Los Angeles and its '53 attendance was just about that of the '50 World Convention. (Each year the science fiction get togethers grow larger and larger.) Anyway, according to reports as of the time I'm writing this, the Westercon and main Convention will be held one right after the other, actually merging together; the West Coast affair will be held first, with Sunday and Monday of the Labor Day Weekend being devoted to the National gathering.

But I imagine that most of the inbound fans traveling from distant parts of the country will arrive in time for the whole works. (Often the night before a Convention opens is the scene of some of the best partying and getting acquainted discussions of the entire affair.)

If you live on the West Coast or near it, or if you have a vacation along about then and are planning

on a trip west, why not plan on attending? If you're a real stf enthusiast and would like to get to know others, you should have a wonderful time.

If you plan to attend, or if you want to support the Convention even if you can't be present this year, why not send your dollar in advance? The dollar covers membership in the Convention; it's a small fee for a fine time. And it's a low price indeed considering what you'll find. You can join on arrival, of course, but it's a help to the committee to receive some working funds ahead of time. Also, if you join prior to the Convention you will receive any bulletins and news letters put out telling of the progress of the plans and what will be on the program.

The Convention mailing address is at the end of this article; you can gain any additional information by writing there.

CERTAIN features have become standard for the Conventions. There is always the auction—and the stf collector will travel hundreds of miles mainly for the chance to bid on some of the original covers and illustrations donated by the professional magazines like MADGE and sold to the highest bidder. (The proceeds of the auction, like those of the annual banquet, go toward defraying Convention expenses.) You'll never have a better chance to acquire an original painting by your favorite stf artist than you will at one of these auctions, and if you have the collector's spirit you'll find a gold

mine here.

There are talks, debates, round table discussion groups. You'll meet the pros at the Convention, and hear them talk about their interest and yours, science fiction. Editors, writers, artists, they'll all be there. You'll meet the fans, too. Big name fans, whom you've been reading about for a long time if you've been in fanzine circles. Middle name fans you may have heard of or may not, brand new, or neo fans, and people who read science fiction and have just dropped in to see what it's all about.

You'll hear talks on various aspects of stf by the people, both professional and amateur, who have spent a good many years as enthusiasts in the field. You'll make new friends and look at a lot of stf personalities in a new light after meeting them. No matter how large the Convention membership grows, no matter how many new people start reading science fiction and become interested in fandom to the point of attending conventions, theres' still a sort of family or clan feeling about the whole field.

A science fiction Convention isn't run for publicity (though more publicity coverage is given every year). It isn't run to be financially profitable (any money left over at the end of one year's Convention is forwarded to the next, as a starter toward defraying expenses). A Convention isn't run for the glory of a few individuals who are putting it on. It's for fans, for those who come back year after year, or whenever they're near enough to make it, for those

who are really interested in science fiction and in the people who like science fiction.

If you go to a Convention expecting to have a good time and to learn a little more about stf, you'll find what you're looking for. Young or old, serious or lighthearted, you will find people with your tastes. It won't be like some non stf conventions; here the speeches are worth listening to; no dry oratory here. The round table discussions are lively and thought provoking, and you'll probably learn more about the stf field in one Convention weekend than you could in months of reading.

Why not try to make it? Send your dollar to:

12th World Science Fiction  
Convention  
Box 335, Station "A"  
Richmond 2, California  
Now to the fanzines.

\* \* \*

HYPHEN: 25c or 1/6 or one U. S. promag of sf pocketbook; Walt Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, North Ireland. There's a lot to read in this issue of *Slant's* younger, not so artistic looking, but fully as humorous sister zine. Bob Tucker's account of Bert Campbell at Philadelphia, "The Campbells are Coming . . . Tra La?" is lightheartedly libelous, and almost as much so is Campbell's rebuttal, "The Filly and the Fight Downstairs."

I imagine that people like Willis, Tucker, Bloch, Campbell, Shaw, White et al take a certain amount of getting used to, if you stumble on to them cold. However, once you



are acclimatized you get acquainted with their writing style, with them, realize that they actually exist, and you can enjoy reading their accounts of each other's doings with a real feeling that you're somehow participating.

Bob Shaw writes "The Soupcon Report," or all about a Convention somewhere in the British Isles. (Belfast, I think, but I've never been sure of the exact location of the Castlereigh Hills. The perils of being an outlander . . .)

This is one you'll like a lot.

\* \* \*

PSYCHOTIC: 10c; monthly; Richard E. Geis, 2631 N. Mississippi, Portland, Ore. *Psy* still makes its regular monthly appearances, right on time, Geis' covers and all. There's another face on the back cover again, while the front one, titled "Fan Leaving Newsstand," is really worth a close second look.

In "The Padded Cell" Vernon McCain looks back over science fiction as it was in the old days, circa the mid '40's, and tells what it's like to reread some of the stories. Noah McLead reviews "The World of Olaf Stapleton," discussing some of Stapleton's stories which were so long unavailable to American readers, until recently anthologized. He writes the kind of review that is really constructive; he gives you the basic idea of the stories and whets your interest in them, instead of doing as so many amateur reviewers do—give a dull prose paraphrase of the plot. Even if you're a very new science fiction reader who is unfamiliar with *Odd John* you'll get

something out of this review.

A large part of *Psychotic's* appeal lies in Geis' editorials. You'll like his "The Leather Couch," and also "Section 8," the letter section, where you'll surely find something controversial being thrashed over.

You certainly could spare a dime for this one.

\* \* \*

OOPSLA! 15c; Gregg Calkins, 2817 11th St., Santa Monica, Calif. Editor Calkins, a long time Utah fan, manages to publish *Oopsia* in his off hours from the Marine Corps.

The current issue is an anniversary issue, marking the beginning of its third year of publication. In it are some varied articles, including a couple of Christmas cards from Walt Willis (1951 and '52 accounts of what was then happening in N. Irish fandom). They're rambling and pun filled, and if you're not used to Willis and Co. they might be rather bewildering at first.

Vernon L. McCain writes in his column. "The Mark of McCain" (what was I saying about puns?) on the professional editor-author relationship. It's a very good article, one with which I'm sure both editors and writers would agree, as it presents both viewpoints fairly. It shows why a strong editorial policy must almost necessarily cramp the writers' individuality, and why it is necessary, to a certain extent, for the writer to slant his stories toward a particular market if he wishes to sell there. Very fair, well informed, and with no axes grinding away.

\* \* \*

**PEON:** 10c; bimonthly; Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St., Norwich, Conn. In this issue Editor Riddle has come up with an especially good selection of material. Jerome Bixby, whom you don't expect to find writing for the fanzines, comes up with as fine a bit of fantasy as you'll find in the amateur field—it's not amateur in writing style, naturally. Vernon McCain writes an open letter to John W. Campbell, and Mrs. E. E. Smith writes about her husband in "The Doctor and I." Then there's Robert Bloch, writing this time in praise of Ted Sturgeon, but with puns. His "Caviar Emptor" concludes with the thought that "Anything from Sturgeon is bound to be caviar . . ."

Jim Harmon's column "Harmony" discusses many things, from what comprises a professional story to the book publishing field to the habits of pros at stf conventions.

Though this is an exceptionally good issue of *Peon*, they're all good, and I'm sure that whichever one you buy will give you your dime's worth of entertainment.

\* \* \*

**INSIDE:** 20c; published three times a year; Ron Smith, 549 South Tenth St., San Jose, Calif. This issue covers the science fiction movies, both current and past. Forrest J. Ackerman, in his "Films in the Future," reviews movies coming up when he wrote the article; many will have been just released at the time you read this. Neal Clark Reynolds in "Fantasy Classics" selects his favorite fantasy pictures of all time. In some

of his selections the fantasy element is minor, or at least it is the more conventional fantasy theme, that of communicating via mediums with the dead, etc. Among his favorites: the Japanese "Rashomon," and Walt Disney's "Fantasia."

Robert Ernest Gilbert in "Sun-down and Dawning" reviews the Reptile vs Mammal struggle. (Why not an alternate-future story in which the reptiles win out?)

The art is always very good. And this issue has a Mel Hunter cover! A fine looking magazine.

\* \* \*

**FANTASY-TIMES:** 10c; published twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. F-T is in its thirteenth year of publication. It's changed somewhat over the years; it used to run more articles and editorial features and was not quite so completely a news medium. But for a long time it has been basically what it is today—the newspaper of science fiction.

Here you will find all the professional stf activities covered. Movies, radio, Tv, comics, in addition to the book and magazine science fiction markets. You'll learn about changes in publishing schedule, new titles appearing, old titles dropping out. You'll keep up on the hard-cover field and on foreign publications.

You'll also find coverage of fan affairs, especially Conventions and other conclaves. However, most of the zine reports on the professional stf field; if you read F-T you'll certainly keep up with what's going on commercially in the science

fiction world.

\* \* \*

EISFA: 10c; monthly; Juanita R. Wellons, 224 S. College, Muncie, Indiana. This is the fanzine put out by the Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association, with editors Wellons and Beverly Joanne Ames sharing the publishing chores. It doesn't stress club news; it's a general interest fanzine with quite a lot of humor.

Among the stories there's Kay Kinerk's "The Freak," which is an interesting account of an alien landing, though a bit farfetched. Robert Adair space-operas his way through "Princess of the Asteroids." And V. A. H. Nietz goes into what it would be like to be domesticated in "Twilight of a God." And there's R. Coulson's short "Thomas," a tale with a punchline ending that's really a good one.

The Eastern Indiana Science Fiction Association must be a good club to belong to, judging from its fanzine.

\* \* \*

A LA SPACE: 20c; bimonthly; Kent Corey, Box 64, Enid, Oklahoma. The issue I have here is the annual. It's a good issue too, with lots of columns and articles and a sprinkling of satire. It's a fanzine that has improved a lot in a year.

Lynn Hickman, editor of *Stf Trends* is now editor of *A la Space*. Some of *Trends'* columns have been transferred to this zine; you'll find Wilkie Conner's "Konners Korner" here now.

Richard Geis in "How Did He Do

It?" discusses a mythical fan who publishes an expensive, prolific and high grade fanzine—at a profit. There's a takeoff on *Dragnet*, which seems to carry the idea of going along with a trend a bit too far. It's "Renfrew of the Royal Mounted," by Eldon Everett.

Annuals seem quite the thing, lately.

\* \* \*

FOG: 5c; Don Wegers, 2444 Valley St., Berkeley 2, Calif. This is a new fanzine. It's hectoed, inexpensively priced, and shows promise of developing into a really good zine. The hectoing is legible, and it has justified margins too. For future issues editor Wegers has lined up quite a list of contributors.

Ray Thompson writes a column "The Playin' of the Ecliptic," in which he discusses 7th fandom (and wonders if there really are 6th's and 7th's and all the rest). Ron Ellik, in "The Cracker Barrel," discusses hard cover books, new and used, and the trend toward paper backs. The editorial is called "Fognet;" oddly enough there's no "Foghorn" anywhere in the issue.

Only a nickel, too.

\* \* \*

Well, that's all in the BOX for this time. More next issue. Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed send it to me, Mari Wolf, *Fandora's Box*, IMAGINATION, Box 230, Evanston, Ill. Hope you make it to San Francisco . . .

—Mari Wolf

# L etters

## from the R eaders

### SPACE STATION DILEMMA . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I think we have the beginning of what could become a great fan argument, a thrilling, raging, furious feud streaking across the pages of the letter section—to take its place in fan history along with the Shaver Mystery and Dianetics!

I imagine that you have already gotten letter after letter from people shocked at the idea of sharing a space station with other countries. But what else can we do when the time comes, if things are the way they are today? If we put up a space station by ourselves it would antagonize other nations. And if Russia gets one first, why good-bye U.S.A.! So should we guard such a secret from the world? Well, the atom bomb was a secret too. On the other hand, could we trust Russia not to turn the station on us if we shared it? That's a silly question, isn't it? Our best tactics, it seems to me, are to stall

them along in conferences until we either achieve peace or the people of Russia revolt!

But of course, given time, they'll be able to get a space station too. So we better put up one first! That will give us the tactical advantage and a good peace lever.

Paula Friedman  
3722 Appleton St., NW  
Washington 16, D. C.

*If you'll note our editorial for this month, Paula, you'll see that this discussion has taken on immediate international significance, what with Moscow's announcement of Soviet space travel plans. It begins to look like a race to make science fiction an absolute fact. And it's the BIG race—one we cannot afford to lose . . . . wkh*

WE IS ALL FRIENDS!

Dear Bill:

The April issue of *Madge* showed a lot of improvement. Even the letter department showed improve-

ment! Frankly, if I may say so, in the past you have shown rather a belligerent attitude in replying to your mail. You've accused the so-called mature science fiction magazines of being pompous pseudo-intellectuals and you've inferred that active fans should keep their hands the hell off world conventions, and you have rather intimated that some of the people who wrote letters to you were kind of stupid.

Matter of fact, you were right about a lot of those things to greater or lesser extent, but I prefer your "we're-all-friends-here" attitude better.

True, some of the competition is pseudo-intellectual, but there are one or two really intellectual magazines around. Maybe *Madge* is one of them, I don't know.

However, at the moment I don't consider *Madge* an intellectual magazine. It seems to me that the science-fantasy field is big — big enough to leave room for all kinds of approaches to the subject. From the very literary *Fantasy and Science Fiction* through the very scientific *Astounding* and the slick *Galaxy*, to *Imagination* which has something of them all and combines the action appeal of *Planet Stories* too. I enjoy reading all stf magazines from *Astounding* to *Planet*, and lately I've noticed that *Imagination* seems to strike the golden mean for them all. *Madge* should appeal to a broader class of people than any other science fiction magazine I can think of.

This seems to be borne out by Carol McKinney's poll of over 300 active fans (which should be a fair-

ly reliable cross-section of active fandom) asking them to name their favorite magazines. According to the results, *Imagination* virtually tied with *Galaxy* (there was only a one vote difference) as Favorite magazine.

I guess this pole was what crystallized my ideas into writing this letter. *Madge* isn't pseudo-intellectual and it does make attempts at commercialized appeal (which is good sense if you want to stay in business) and its stories do not fit the so-called mature pattern—but it is good entertainment and keeps faith with science fiction, story and feature-wise.

You are editing a science fiction magazine, not a general slick, and you know it! Praise be.

Like I say, we get older and wiser. I used to think of *Madge* as a cheap pulp and *Galaxy* as an outstanding slick. Now I realize that in different ways they are equal. I'm glad that there are so many approaches to science fiction. It means competition and variety and both for the good.

I hope *Madge* continues to improve. The stories in the April issue seemed more solid than usual. Your departments are among the best available, and *Madge* just doesn't lay there lifeless. It has a personality of its own. Watch out! You know females—she may start editing you to her tastes!

Jim Harmon  
427 E. 8th St.  
Mt. Carmel, Ill.

*Us call Madge's readers stupid? Sir, you're out of your mind! The readers of Madge we consider to be*

*among the world's most intelligent people. Fie on you, Jim for making such an accusation! You are right in saying we're all friends here. We may have a few differences of opinion in the letter section, but then that's what this department is for! Right? . . . Glad you think so highly of Madge, and also glad our girl rated at the top of the poll you mention. Personality? You're absolutely right. That, we believe is part of the key to her popularity. But hevins to Betsy, how could you ever have looked at Madge as just a cheap pulp? . . . So ok, your apology is accepted. • wkh*

### WANTS MORE TOFFEE!

Dear Bill:

It seems that I must come to the defense of stf's greatest writer, Ray Bradbury, as I see two letters in the April issue disagreeing with me about Mr. B.

First, Russ Brown is absolutely right about Bradbury. The reason there is so much controversy over him is that he is introducing an entirely new type of literature, a sort of branch of stf. This new branch is so far above other types of stf in emotional appeal that Bradbury stands apart from any other writer in history with a style that cannot be copied.

As to Russ's opinion about Heinlein, I'll simply name a few more writers I consider superior to him—Dan Galouye (his **SECRET OF THE IMMORTALS** in the April Madge was colossal!) Miller, and

Clarke. But this "top" writer debate is, of course, simply a matter of opinion.

In reference to Denver Johnson's letter, he doesn't seem to like anybody! Heinlein is not stf's top writer, but he deserves praise. If he cannot appreciate Bradbury's poetic prose, who does he like, Mickey Spillane?

About the magazine; more cartoons, the April cover stunk, but there wasn't a bad story in the issue—and when in the name of *Gholx* are you going to get another TOFFEE story? The more the merrier!

Peter Kreeft

26 Richardson Ave.

Haledon, N. J.

*For our money, Bradbury, Heinlein, Galouye—they're all top writers, Pete. And Madge has published stories by all of them—and will publish more in the future, which will guarantee you a continued supply of the best stf obtainable! Our gal TOFFEE? Elsewhere in this issue you'll find an announcement of a BRAND NEW companion magazine to IMAGINATION that will be on sale the first week in July. Who's featured in the first issue? Yep—TOFFEE, with a full book-length novel! And if that's not enough for you, there'll be a brand new TOFFEE story coming up in Madge shortly. We've got Charlie Myers on the ball and we'll keep him busy! Don't forget to reserve your copy of the first issue of IMAGINATIVE TALES at your newsdealer now. That's the BIG science-fantasy news of the year. Ok, you satisfied? . . wkh*

## MARTIANS UNDER HER BED!

Dear Bill:

This is not a letter from a Martian. There isn't even a poem. I've just got a problem.

I am one of those "things" referred to as a teenager. And I've got a question to ask.

How are you going to indoctrinate your family and friends to stf? My parents regard it as about as low a form of reading as is possible. I hotly defend my copy of IMAGINATION each month against such disparaging remarks as: "With the money you waste on those magazines you could buy—" etc.

There are also the tried and true wisecracks about finding Martians under my bed and rockets in my pockets. My friends think I'm something from outer space for liking science fiction.

Is such prejudice fair?

Sheri Flowe  
4722 Bancroft  
San Diego 16, Cal.

*Your problem is not a new one, Sheri, in fact those of us who have been in the field for many years constantly run up against the same sort of tongue-in-cheek attitude. Actually, the people who disparage science fiction magazines are the same people who will uphold slicks such as COLLIER'S, the POST, LIFE, etc., as worthwhile reading. They're right about the slicks, of course but they fail to acknowledge the fact that these same "accepted" magazines frequently feature science fiction stories and articles. To us, at least, prejudice against a magazine featuring solid*

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*science fiction is nothing short of narrow-mindedness. (We're being deliberately polite!) As to finding a Martian under your bed—if our technological advance keeps up the rapid pace it now exhibits, don't be surprised at anything! . . . wth*

## ANTI-STF HUSBAND

Dear Bill:

At last this lowly worm has turned and is going to start munching heads off!

I refer to the drooling idiot in the April reader section, namely, Ron Ellik, who writes that only active fans may do this or that.

After nearly twenty years of head-shakings and "Oh, you read those things!" I think I'm entitled

to be called a fan of science fiction. Starting in the long days of only two or three stf mags on the stands to the present-day plenty, I've read and enjoyed stf without knowing any other stf fans.

I don't write letters to mags because nearly all of the science in current stf is over my head and I can't discuss something I can't understand. As long as the authors don't try to send me to Mars in a bathtub, I'm satisfied.

I don't attend conventions because when single I couldn't afford to, and now that I'm married my anti-stf husband would blow a cork if I mentioned it.

These things don't prevent me from reading and enjoying stf and I intend to continue doing same for another twenty years! But please inform the active fans such as Ron Ellik, that even if I don't know what they are fighting about half the time, I enjoy their letters. (Perhaps a few sent my way would relieve the horrible feeling I sometimes get that I'm the only sane, normal person in a whole world of nuts who do not as yet believe in space travel!)

Thanks for letting me sound off twenty years of gripes. Just keep *Madge* coming and I'll be completely satisfied.

Mrs. W. F. Boeck  
46 Whitfield Place  
Mt. Tabor, N. J.

*What's with this anti-stf husband of yours? Why not get him to read a current issue of Madge and then see if he doesn't change his mind. Most anti-stf people haven't bothered to read the literature — once*

*they do the chances are they'll like it just as we do . . . And say, don't wait another twenty years before writing again. Matter of fact, get that hubby of yours to drop us a line! . . . . . wth*

## DOWNRIGHT SLANDEROUS!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Have just finished reading the April issue of *Madge*. First I must admit that I have missed the last few issues of *Madge* due to the birth of a brand new son (due to be a "spacer," by the way). But on to the main purpose of this letter, a bone to pick with author Milton Lesser.

His story, *PARIAH*, is completely unrealistic. Furthermore, it is downright slanderous—unless the character of most females and their men undergo drastic changes in the future (which I feel is most unlikely).

No woman in love with her husband would consent to a situation as it is presented in this story, unless coerced by threat of death or torture to her child.

Furthermore, any man worthy of being called a man would insist on seeing his son and would have to be convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that his wife was truly happy and secure and that his son was well taken care of. He wouldn't just leave with a picture and run back to his ship—and the stars.

Mr. Lesser sounds to me like a wounded adolescent who at some time received a "Dear John" letter and is casting about trying to explain it to his wounded ego instead



of growing up to face facts!

Mrs. Margaret Matzdorff  
71 Gramatan Drive  
Yonkers, N. Y.

*We will pull an editorial prerogative on this one and pass the buck along to the author. Although in all fairness we must admit we didn't have the same reaction to the story as you did, Margaret. We kind of pictured the spaceman as a mighty disillusioned man, weary, and down on his psychological heels. The emotional blow he received upon returning home to Earth was such that he could have reacted as he did. But at the same time, you do have a reasonable counter opinion. What say, Milt? . . . . with*

ALL OF A SUDDEN . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

10x10 to the 10th power cheers for IMAGINATION This mag is the best—all others fall short!

I started reading stf about three years ago, reading everything that came along, *Madge* included. All of a sudden I discovered *Madge* was the best—the very most! You're now making me a collector of *Madge*!

Lawrence Bourne  
2708 N. E. Halsey  
Portland, Ore.

*You'll find a back issue coupon below to help you fill out that collection, Larry! . . . . with*

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